Come break my heart again

C.W. FARNSWORTH

come break my heart again

C.W. FARNSWORTH

OceanofPDF.com

BLURB

From a distance, every surface appears perfect.

The exterior of Eleanor Clarke's life looks just as pristine up close. The scars and scratches are all hidden. They were all inflicted in the same place: an overgrown field of wildflowers in an affluent suburb.

The scenic spot is where her older sister died, leaving Elle to shoulder the crushing expectations of being a Clarke alone.

It's where she spent forbidden moments with Ryder James, the last person she should have turned to for an escape.

And it's where her world fell apart during senior year of high school.

Seven years later, everything's been carefully glued back together. She's got the prestigious job, the perfect guy, the polished life.

Until one phone call cracks it all back open.

Does it hurt ***more*** or ***less*** when the same person breaks your heart again?

OceanofPDF.com

COME BREAK MY HEART AGAIN
Copyright © 2021 by C.W. Farnsworth

Print ISBN: 9798544773948

All rights reserved.

This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or, if an actual place, are used fictitiously and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

This book may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person you wish to share it with. If you are reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then you should return it to the seller and purchase your own copy.

Thank you for respecting the author's work.

Cover Design © Bailey Cover Boutique
Editing by Alison Maxwell (Red Leaf Proofing)

OceanofPDF.com

Follow your heart.

For me, that meant writing this book.

OceanofPDF.com

CONTENTS

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Epilogue

Author’s Note
Acknowledgments
About the Author
Also by C.W. Farnsworth

OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE

"I can't *believe* you're not hungover," Brooke groans, flipping her long blonde hair over one shoulder to emphasize her dismay at my lack of overindulgence last night.

"I was out with my parents," I respond dryly. "Wasn't exactly pounding shots the way you apparently were."

"You only graduate from law school once, Eleanor."

I use my left hand to push the rotating door that leads from the lobby of Brooke's apartment building out onto the bustling street, waving off the doorman rushing over to assist us. She still doesn't notice.

"Well aware," I reply as we emerge into the May morning sunshine, slipping on a pair of oversized sunglasses to shade my eyes from the glare. Even if you could, I don't know anyone who would willingly put themselves through that form of torture twice.

Brooke hails a cab, and we slide into the backseat. My leather tote bag vibrates. I grab my phone out, scanning the most recent messages. The latest one is from my father. *Dinner at 5. Don't be late.*

Sentimental as always.

I start to tap out a response, and that's when Brooke decides to be observant.

"HOLY SHIT!" The cabbie swerves a little, setting off a series of honks in the heavy Boylston Street traffic surrounding us. "William *proposed*?"

"Last night," I state smugly, flashing the cabbie an apologetic look. My own eardrums are still ringing from Brooke's shriek. "Took you long enough to notice."

“Oh my God! Tell me everything! Did he cry? Was there champagne? How many carats is this?” She grabs my left hand and starts inspecting the massive diamond now decorating my ring finger.

“He rented out the private room at Pastiché. No crying. Yes to the champagne. There was a string quartet, too. I didn’t ask how many carats,” I rattle off.

“I’m still upset he’s an only child, but you two are perfect together. He’s perfect.”

“Yeah, I know,” I reply. William York *is* perfect. Or the closest possible thing to it, at least. He’s handsome, considerate, charming, and intelligent. I didn’t have to think before saying “yes” last night. But his proposal felt a bit… staged. In an upscale restaurant with champagne on hand and our parents already discussing what the theme for our first child’s birthday party will be. It wasn’t the passionate moment I always envisioned agreeing to spend my life with someone might be like. Some moments don’t live up to the hype, I guess.

“Your mom’s already wedding planning, I assume?”

“Of course,” I reply, smiling wryly. “Next June.”

My mother—both my parents, actually—*love* William. He’s exactly the type of guy they hoped I’d end up with. Expected I’d end up with. Yet I know part of their euphoria last night was due to the fact they both know there was a time where me ending up with a “William” looked extremely unlikely.

“I suppose Eliza’s got maid of honor dibs?”

I smile sheepishly. “I promised her. She asked me to be hers.”

“Yeah, yeah. I better be a bridesmaid.”

“You will be,” I assure Brooke, as we pull up outside the small café that’s our destination.

Avery and Maddie, the two other members of our quartet, are already waiting out front. We all met on the first day of orientation and struggled through the late nights and dry professors together. This is a farewell of sorts. The end of an era. Following graduation yesterday, I’m the only one remaining in Boston. Maddie and Avery both smile and wave when they spot us climbing out of the cab.

I hand the cabbie a hundred that I hope will compensate for any hearing damage Brooke might have inflicted.

“Good morning!” Maddie trills as we approach.

“Gah!” Brooke says. “How are you always so cheerful?”

“Someone had too much to drink last night,” Avery teases.

“Me drinking too much last night is so twenty minutes ago,” Brooke replies. “Check this out, ladies.”

She grabs my left hand and waves it in their faces.

“William proposed?!” Maddie squeals.

“You lucky bitch! What is that? Three carats?” This from Avery.

“Private room at Pastiché with champagne and a quartet,” Brooke adds. “Wedding is next June.”

“Way to steal my thunder,” I tell Brooke, sticking out my tongue at her.

“Whatever.” She waggles her manicured fingertips at me. “I just caught them up. Now we can all grill you for more details as soon as we get our mimosas.”

I roll my eyes. “Let’s grab our table. I’m starving. All I’ve had to eat today was a banana.”

Brooke and Maddie head for the white awning that hangs over the entrance to the café. My phone rings. I pause and pull it out to see an unfamiliar number lit up on the screen.

“I’ll be right in,” I tell Avery. “I’m still waiting to hear back on a few interviews. This might be one of the firms.”

She nods and follows Brooke and Maddie inside the café.

“Eleanor Clarke,” I answer crisply.

“Hello, Ms. Clarke. My name is Lily Sampson. I’m an attorney with Until Proven Guilty. We’re a nonprofit organization looking to assist felons who have been wrongly incarcerated—”

“I’m familiar with the name, Ms. Sampson,” I reply, already regretting answering. “But I’m afraid you have the wrong number. I didn’t apply for a position with your organization.”

“A position?” Lily replies, sounding surprised. “No, I’m calling you in relation to a case we’ve been working on. You’re mentioned in one of the interview transcripts, and I was hoping you might be able to assist me in tracking down some additional information to help our client.”

Definitely shouldn’t have answered. I watch Brooke, Avery, and Maddie head deeper into the café through the window and try to figure out how to end this politely. “I’m afraid you still have the incorrect person. I certainly haven’t been involved in any criminal activity.”

“I wasn’t insinuating you are, Ms. Clarke. But Mr. James—”

A low buzzing sound starts in my ears. “What?” I choke out. “Who is the case about?”

“Ryder James.” The buzzing grows louder.

“Ryder James?” I repeat. The syllables of his name feel heavy in my mouth. Probably has something to do with the fact it’s been seven years since I uttered it last.

“Yes, we believe we have a strong case Mr. James is, in fact innocent, and if there’s anything you can tell us that might help—”

“I’ve got to go,” I blurt out, and pull the phone away from my ear, ending the call.

Then I rush over to the trash can sitting alongside the curb and throw up noisily inside it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

OceanofPDF.com

SEVEN YEARS EARLIER

My final first day of high school, I wake up to a staring match with a squirrel. It's a regular occurrence.

The stare-off, not the final first day.

The bushy face and beady eyes are a reliable sight, perching on the broad oak branch outside my window every morning at six on the dot. I named him Chester—if it is in fact a him, I'm not really sure how to tell a squirrel's sex—simply because it seemed like a fitting name for a rodent.

I don't mind the sight of Chester crunching on an acorn, but the final first day of high school is not an event I'm looking forward to. Not for the usual reasons a high schooler might be dreading the start of senior year. In fact, I don't think anyone in Fernwood, Massachusetts would expect I might be anything less than enthused about returning to Fernwood High School for a final year. I don't struggle in school. I'm not bullied.

I'm Eleanor Clarke.

My life is perfect.

At least, it appears that way.

But there are plenty of cracks in the perfection which are carefully hidden. My relationship with my parents, for one. My sister's death, for another.

"Eleanor!" There's a rapid, efficient knocking on my bedroom door.

"Yes?" I respond, sitting up in bed and yawning.

"You're awake?"

No, I'm sleep talking, I think. But sass isn't an approved part of being a perfect Clarke. "Yes," I reply instead.

"Good. Breakfast is ready. Wear the yellow sundress."

I sigh, quietly enough my mother can't hear. One would think I'm seven, not seventeen. "Okay."

I slip out from underneath the crisp cotton sheets, stretching. Chester scampers away, startled by the movement. I head into my adjoining bathroom, heaving out a sigh as I study the line of products I put on every day. What I would give to show up at school with a face free from make-up and uncurled hair.

It takes me twenty minutes to run through my full routine, and then I cross my room to enter the walk-in closet that flanks my bedroom on the opposite side. The yellow sundress is hanging at the end of the closest rack, clearly planted by my mother. The color and classic silhouette are something a young child might wear, but the material clings to my curves in a way that makes it clear I'm almost a woman.

A yogurt parfait and hardboiled egg are waiting for me when I enter the formal dining room, same as every other morning.

"Good morning, Dad," I tell this morning's edition of the *Boston Globe* before I take a bite of egg.

The newsprint lowers to reveal my father. "Good morning, Eleanor." He takes a bite of oatmeal, then a sip of coffee. It's not even seven, but he's already dressed in his omnipresent black suit, right down to the monogrammed cufflinks and ironed pocket square. I used to wonder what he'd do if a glob of oatmeal or splash of creamer landed on the pristine material.

It's never happened.

Doubt it ever will.

Michael Clarke controls every situation he's a part of.

My mother breezes into the dining room, nodding approvingly when she takes in my appearance. She's carrying a bowl containing exactly six pieces of cantaloupe, which she proceeds to eat between glances at the planner that determines how she spends each moment of every day.

I finish my breakfast in silence. "I'm heading to school," I announce as soon as I've swallowed the final clump of yogurt-coated granola.

"Drive safe," my mother tells me.

A sweet sentiment that carries extra weight in the Clarke household. When your elder daughter dies in a car accident, it becomes your worst fear. It's a warning, too. *Don't do anything reckless. You saw how that turned out for your sister*.

Little do my parents know, I've done my fair share of stupid stuff.

I was just more covert about it than my sister.

"Don't forget about the call with Dean Willis this afternoon," is my father's farewell. Because why just rely on grades and test scores to get into college when you have money and connections?

"I won't," I promise, grabbing my backpack from the entryway and heading out the front door. My convertible is parked in the driveway, red paint glinting in the sunshine. A convertible is *not* the most practical vehicle for living in New England. But I'm far from a car connoisseur. When I went with my parents to pick out the obligatory sixteenth birthday present in Fernwood, I just pointed to the prettiest one. I named the cherry-colored car Betty.

Fernwood is a small town, about a half hour outside of central Boston. It provides all the allure of small-town living: sprawling lots, fresh air, and plenty of square footage, while also allowing for a reasonable commute to the high-powered downtown offices where most of its adult residents work.

My family's three-story Colonial is located in Fernwood's most exclusive cul-de-sac, and I drive through the obnoxious stone facade that marks the entrance to my neighborhood. Most of Fernwood is a suburban utopia. There's a small downtown section with a few restaurants, a movie theater, a general store, and a couple gift shops. Just the essentials not worthy of a trip all the way into the city.

I park outside Brewed Awakenings, the local coffee shop. In a bid to avoid more quiet time with my parents, I left the house far earlier than I needed to. Plus, my mother is convinced caffeine is bad for the nerves and stains your teeth. Having someone *tsk* while you sip coffee kind of ruins the experience. Since sneaking coffee is the closest I get to rebelling these days, I try to do it as often as I can. The only reason I haven't gotten caught yet is because my mother hosts all her board meetings at the teahouse across the street. Drinking herbal, of course.

The scent of roasting beans greets me as I step inside the coffee shop, glancing around to see if there's anyone I know. Most of Fernwood's residents would probably be categorized as snobs by any outside observer.

I'm not an outside observer; I'm a Clarke. Part of the gold standard every other family in town aspires to. Not even tragedy kept us from being idolized. It wasn't *Oh, I guess the Clarkes are as fallible as the rest of us.*

No, it was *That poor family. But look how well they're handling it!* Appearances can be deceiving.

I'm met with smiles instead of scrutinizing expressions as I head toward the front counter to greet who I often consider to be my favorite person in Fernwood.

"Morning, Joe."

"Elle! Wasn't sure if I'd see you this morning," the owner of the shop says. "Figured they would need you over at the school to oversee something," he teases.

"Not on the first day," I reply. "Got the whole year for that." If it's a club or committee at Fernwood High, I'm probably a part of it.

"Don't forget to have some fun, you hear me?" Joe wags a gnarled finger at me. He must be nearing eighty now, but his physical appearance is the only indication of it. He's got the energy and zest for life many half his age are lacking.

That I'm lacking.

"I won't," I lie. "Football season is starting soon!" I slip into the role of head cheerleader effortlessly.

"Mabel hated football," Joe sighs nostalgically. Mabel was his late wife. Her blueberry scones were the favorite part of my childhood.

I pat the hand dotted with age. "I'm sorry, Joe. I didn't mean to—"

"Nonsense, nonsense." He waves my apology away. "Reminiscing is important. Makes you feel like you never really lost them." He peers at me. "Suppose you know something about that."

"I guess," I shift uncomfortably. How do you reminisce about someone you barely knew?

"The usual today?" Joe asks.

I nod, handing over my credit card to pay for the drink and then heading down to the end of the counter to wait for my beverage.

"Good morning, Elle," I glance over my shoulder to see Mr. Hathaway —my boyfriend's father—rising from one of the round tables.

"Good morning, Mr. Hathaway," I respond politely.

"Jason," he reminds me with a smile. I smile back, but don't correct myself. "You're up bright and early," Mr. Hathaway continues, glancing at his Rolex. "I'd imagine Liam's just rolling out of bed at this hour."

I laugh. "Probably."

Mr. Hathaway pulls his suit jacket off the back of the chair and puts it back on. “Excited for senior year?”

“Thrilled,” I respond, with a cheery smile. “Best part of high school, right?”

“Absolutely,” he replies. “Especially for a girl like yourself with such a bright future. College applications already started?”

“Finished,” I admit. “Dad had me spend the summer on them.”

Mr. Hathaway clucks his tongue in a way that makes me think it was the answer he expected. “Well, I can only hope some of your drive wears off on Liam.”

“He’s had football all summer,” I defend, playing the part of the supportive girlfriend.

Mr. Hathaway laughs. “Ah, young love. Hope my son manages to make you a member of the family before you take off those rose-colored glasses.” I just smile. I took those off a while ago. “Well, I’d better head to the office. We’ll see you at the game on Friday night?”

“I’ll be there!” I respond with a pep I’m sure he can’t tell is forced.

“You were at the practices this summer, right?” Mr. Hathaway asks.

“Yes,” I reply. For obvious reasons, our cheerleading camp coincided with the football team’s summer schedule.

“Much to cheer for?” Mr. Hathaway inquires, and I realize what he’s getting at.

“Er, about the same,” I tell him tactfully.

He sighs. “That’s what I thought. Goodbye, Elle.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Hat—Jason.”

He departs with one final smile.

“One caramel macchiato with extra whipped cream. Pretty sure there’s some coffee mixed in, too,” Joe announces, setting my frothy concoction in front of me.

“Thanks, Joe,” I say, with a genuine smile.

“See you tomorrow?” He grins, showing off his golden tooth.

“I’ll be here,” I promise, heading toward the door.

I haven’t killed nearly as much time as I’d hoped to but sitting in my convertible alone just feels sad. I start the engine, opting to head to the left instead of the right. The main street melds right into the high school’s campus. But between the two is situated the part of town I avoid like the plague.

Not for the reason people think.

My less direct route takes me along the fringes of Fernwood. Close to the part most residents pretend doesn't exist. Just like so many parts of the world, Fernwood demonstrates what it looks like when you have copious amounts of money… and very little of it.

Most of the town falls into the former category.

One trailer park falls into the latter.

There have been numerous attempts over the years to off the couple square miles onto the neighboring town, with committee members—including my father—arguing the settlement is nothing but a leech on town resources wealthy residents pay five figures worth of taxes for.

A more humane viewpoint is that they're people with no place else to go.

I pass the road I know leads back to the trailer park, continuing along the tree-lined street back toward the downtown area. When I reach Fernwood High, the same dread I woke up with this morning reappears.

Not because I don't know what to expect.

Because I do.

Despite growing up in Fernwood, this is only my fourth year attending school here. My father yanked me and my older sister Sarah out of our respective boarding schools when he decided to run for school committee three years ago. Something about it looking bad to *not* have your children attend the educational system you're representing. I wonder if he regrets it now, after what happened to Sarah.

Probably not, since it would require him admitting he made a mistake.

Something Michael Clarke does not do.

Expensive vehicles already half-fill the parking lot when I step out of my car, coffee in one hand and keys in the other.

"Elle!" Kinsley Adams runs over to me as soon as I emerge. "Wow, you look gorgeous! That dress!"

"Me? Look at you!" I exclaim. "Your skirt is adorable."

She preens under my praise as half the cheerleading squad descends upon us. One would *not* think we've spent the past two months swapping compliments. Every article of clothing must be remarked upon. I'd find it exhausting, if I hadn't learned how to follow this song and dance years ago. Coming up with an endless supply of accolades is second nature by now.

I extract myself from the group by saying I have to meet with Principal Watkins about the back-to-school fundraiser.

It's not a lie. I spend the next fifteen minutes in the principal's office. Not being scolded, being complimented. Principal Watkins is as susceptible to the Clarke charm as the rest of the town. First up is some exclaiming over my contributions to the high school so far, followed by an analysis of all that's yet to come this year.

I tune out two minutes in.

By the time I emerge back out into the hallway, it's crowded with students. I head to my locker, taking advantage of the way the crowd parts for me. But when I reach my locker, the metal won't open.

"Ugh!" I smack the unyielding surface in annoyance.

"D-d-do you need help, Elle?" Kevin Davis stutters to my right.

"Sure," I reply, moving to the side. "I think it's stuck."

"What's your combination?" Kevin asks nervously.

"23-19-06," I rattle off, meeting the gaze of a group of freshmen staring at me. They scuttle past as soon as they realize I've spotted them.

"Hey, babe," I hear from behind me. I turn to see Liam Hathaway approaching me. He gives me a quick kiss, attracting an envious stare from every girl in the hallway. My blond-haired, brown-eyed boyfriend is my natural counterpart.

We're the golden couple of Fernwood High.

The living embodiment of every high school cliche you could think of.

"Hey," I reply. It's close to ninety degrees out, and he's wearing his letterman jacket. The people who act most confident are often the most insecure, I've found. Liam doesn't dispel that theory.

"What's the dweeb doing?" Liam asks me, inclining his chin toward Kevin, who's still fiddling with my locker.

"Be nice. He's fixing my locker," I reply.

"Why didn't you ask me?" Liam looks affronted.

"You weren't here."

"It's SENIOR YEAR!" I'm distracted from my locker—and Liam—by the appearance of my best friend Paige. Her yell draws the attention of the whole hallway. I laugh at her exuberance. She skips to my side and studies my appearance, tossing her strawberry blonde hair over one shoulder.

"Why aren't you wearing the pink romper?"

"Why do you think?" I reply dryly.

“At what point do you think you’ll stop letting your mother run your life?”

“You’ve met her. When I’m fifty. At least.”

Paige snorts.

A loud bang sounds to my left, and I glance over to see Kevin is looking triumphantly at my now open locker.

“Thanks,” I tell him, grabbing the notebooks I need out of the locker and then slamming the door shut again. I start down the hallway with Paige and Liam on either side of me. The crowded hallway splits for us like the Red Sea.

“Nicole and Alec broke up,” Paige informs me as we walk along. “He wants to ‘explore his options.’”

I scoff. “Typical.”

“Jack Rodgers hooked up with Aimee last weekend.”

“Good for them.” I laugh. “What makes you think I care about any of this?”

“I figured as queen you’d want to know what all your little worker bees are up to.”

I roll my eyes. “You know I don’t.”

“That was pretty much it, anyway.”

“Thank God,” I mutter.

“Aside from Ryder James.”

Suddenly steps are a challenge. “What?”

“Ryder James? He’s back from juvie or Florida or wherever he’s been.”

“He is?”

“Uh-huh,” Paige replies, no longer paying close attention to our conversation. She’s waving at some junior, oblivious to the bomb she’s just dropped on me.

Because she doesn’t know it was a bomb.

Because no one would ever think Elle Clarke knows—cares—who Ryder James is, or where he’s living.

I don’t say anything as we continue down the hallway, too focused on placing one foot in front of the other. Pretty sure Liam is talking to me, but I don’t hear a word of whatever he’s saying.

Suddenly, I *don’t* know what to expect from today.

There are about twenty kids from the edge of town who currently attend Fernwood High School. One of the repeated complaints among those trying

to expel the trailer park from the town's limits is the fear its teenage residents are going to be a bad influence on the rest of town.

Despite those fears, I've never so much as spoken with any of them—with the exception of one.

I met Ryder James on my first day at Fernwood High. Since I grew up here, I knew most of my classmates already, but had never attended school with any of them before.

I wasn't nervous. Even as a freshman, I had some serious status.

Ryder was paired with me on a Physics project. He was unlike anyone I'd ever met. We spent months meeting up to work on the project at the wildflower-filled field that separates the high school from downtown, since neither of us wanted to be at our own houses—or each other's.

Our meet ups continued even after we finished it. I didn't realize how small my world was until I met him. Until I experienced how thrilling it was to be the girl who broke the rules. Especially when we kissed. More than kissed.

Then, with two weeks left in freshman year, he disappeared. Without a word. A note. Anything. Just didn't show up for school.

I panicked for the rest of the school year and the start of the summer, worried something happened to him. Concerned someone was going to find out about us. Waiting for my friends to learn I'd flung my virginity at one of the boys we pretended didn't exist. For my parents to find out I wasn't as perfect as they expected me to be.

Rumors swirled about Ryder's disappearance, but none of them mentioned me.

Then my sister died, and memories of sneaking out to kiss a boy in a treehouse became distant ones. It was just me and my parents' expectations, and perfection no longer had any wiggle room.

I'd be lying if I said I don't still think about Ryder sometimes.

But it's the absolute truth I *never* expected to see him again.

I enter homeroom in a daze. Liam leaves my side and strolls over to his football buddies. Paige bounces over to some of our friends. Neither of them is actually in my homeroom, but no one seems to care. I'd say it's a perk of being seniors, but it's really just a perk of being *us*.

The loudspeaker crackles to life to expel the morning announcements, but the noise level in the classroom doesn't decrease at all. Mrs. Andrews,

our homeroom teacher, doesn't make any attempt to quiet the group of students.

I follow Paige over to our friends, but I don't engage in the conversation that's a continuation of the gossip about Jack Rodgers. Instead, I take a seat and pull out the list of questions and suggested answers my college tutor compiled for my conversation with Dean Willis later today. But the words swim before my eyes like water was just dumped atop the page.

I can't focus.

"We haven't even had an actual class yet, and you're already doing work?" Paige takes a seat on the desk in front of me, spinning around to eye the paper I'm studying.

"It's for that college call later. My dad will freak if I don't regurgitate exactly what they're looking for," I explain.

"Elle. You're going to be a shoo-in anywhere you apply."

I shrug, although I know she's probably right. "Can't hurt to prepare."

"As long as you promise not to do anything but gossip at my birthday sleepover this weekend." Paige tells me.

"I promise," I reply.

"By the way, I got my mom to agree that the boys can come over in the afternoon. Make sure Liam gets all the football guys there."

"I doubt they'll be all that hard to convince," I reply dryly. Paige's got a pool.

Paige grins. "Yeah, well we know better than to assign Liam a difficult task."

It might make me a terrible girlfriend to laugh at that, but I do anyway. Liam had one job for the winter carnival this past February: organize the snow cone booth. He managed to tell the delivery guy the wrong day, break the ice machine, and order nothing but orange syrup.

The bell indicating the end of homeroom rings, and I take a long pull of my coffee concoction as we walk out into the hallway to head to History.

Liam gives me a quick kiss and then peels off to head to English.

"So I was thinking mini tacos for Saturday instead of pizza, what do you think?" Paige asks.

"Tacos?" I reply. Anxiety is rising like a tide inside me. It was one thing in homeroom. Now we're out in the open. He could be around any corner.

"For my birthday? The event we were literally *just* discussing?" Paige prompts.

“Oh, right. Yeah, tacos. Great.” I’m still searching the hallway like I’m on a treasure hunt.

“Are you okay, Elle?” Paige asks. “You’re acting weird.”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” He’s not in this hallway, so I finally look over at her. “It’s just kind of hitting me this is our last first day of high school.”

Paige shoots me a disbelieving look. “You’re getting sentimental? Thought you couldn’t wait to get out of here.”

I make a noncommittal sound as we turn the corner into the Social Studies wing. I’m too busy scanning this hallway to focus on our conversation.

Paige gives up on it with a huff.

“Hey, girls!” Kennedy Jacobs is waiting outside the door that leads into our History classroom.

“Hi, Kennedy,” I greet, and she beams.

Kennedy transferred here last year and made it immediately evident her current goal in life is to be me. She copies everything Paige and I do. She made the cheer squad this summer, and I’m hoping it will mean she stops imitating everything else about me. Being a member of the squad is essentially a golden ticket to Fernwood High’s most elite social status.

“Super cute outfit,” Paige compliments, giving me a conspiratorial wink. Kennedy’s wearing the exact same romper I wore on our trip to the city last week.

I smile as Kennedy blushes.

“Oh, wow, thank you. You, too. Both of you.”

I laugh. “Thanks. I was going to wear a romper today, too. Maybe tomorrow.”

“The one you wore to Kinsley’s last week?” Kennedy questions.

“No, it’s the one I got—”

“Is there any chance you’ll wrap this gabfest up in the next few hours? Some of us are eagerly awaiting the start of History, you know?”

My stomach dips like the linoleum beneath me has just disappeared.

I know it’s him immediately. Not only do I recognize his voice, but no one else at this school would ever interrupt me.

I turn slowly, taking advantage of every possible second before I have to face him.

Finally, I can’t postpone the inevitable any longer. Part of me doesn’t want to.

Vivid green eyes meet mine.

At fourteen, Ryder James gave me butterflies.

At seventeen, I can only hope I'm not visibly drooling.

His eyes are the exact same. Everything else is different. His brown hair is darker and shorter, just long enough for fingers to run through it, exactly the way he's doing right now. He's sporting a dark tan that makes me think maybe the rumor about Florida had some validity. But the biggest change is his stature. He was always tall, but I'd guess he's over six feet now. Not only that, he's got muscles that make him look more like a man than a boy. Shamelessly, I watch the tendons in his forearm and bicep contract and relax as he drops his hand back to his side.

Finished ogling his body, I register what he's wearing for the first time. A pair of athletic shorts and a threadbare cotton t-shirt. He stands out in the sea of polo shirts and khaki shorts. But I know he would even if he were wearing a preppy designer outfit like every other male in sight.

Because Ryder James is the hottest guy I've ever seen.

"You're back." I make sure the words don't hold any indication of my feelings about his return. But I guess studying him for a good minute probably said a whole lot.

"Looks that way." Ryder flashes a carefree smirk. He appraises me, his emerald eyes swimming with secrets. My secrets.

"For good?" Every nerve in my body tightens and tenses, waiting to see how he'll respond. It's a far cry from the predictable monotony I typically feel in these hallways.

"Looks that way," he repeats. He advances on me, and I hold my ground, even as thrills of awareness race through me. He stops when he's about a foot away. "You're still blocking the door."

Every eye in the hallway is on us. I forgot how exasperating he is. How blunt. How thrilling. People paid attention to me freshman year, but rarely him. The kids from the trailer park kept to themselves, and we did the same. Ryder and I barely acknowledged each other at school back then, mostly because it added to the anticipation, but if we did, it wouldn't have merited more than a side glance or two.

That's changed now. Not only because I'm the perfect prom queen. Because I'm no longer the only one fascinated by Ryder James, evidently.

"Yeah, you should get to class. Your attendance record is already pretty spotty."

He grins at my reference to his two-year disappearance, and the expression *weak at the knees* takes on a whole new meaning. He sidles past me, so close I can feel the heat emanating from his body.

“I missed you too, Elle,” he calls over his right shoulder as he enters the classroom.

I exhale for what feels like the first time in hours.

“Who was *that*?” Kennedy breathes to my right.

“Ryder James.” Paige answers for me, and I’m surprised. I didn’t think she would recognize him.

“He’s hot. Like, really hot.” Kennedy comments. Her observation annoys me more than the never-ending stream of compliments usually exiting her mouth. A lot more.

I stride into the classroom. Ryder’s standing at the front of the room, talking to Mr. Anderson. I take a seat in one of the first rows, not wanting to be stuck staring at the back of his head for the next hour. Despite my lengthy appraisal in the hallway, I can still feel my eyes being drawn toward him, like a magnet attracted to the opposite pole. I want to look again, but I don’t allow myself to. I didn’t have any time to prepare for our last encounter, and I’m worried it revealed more than I wanted to.

I could have pretended I didn’t recognize him. Remember him.

Instead, I ogled him and then asked if he was back for good. In a way that didn’t sound like I was hoping this is a temporary visit, I think.

Paige takes a seat on one side of me, Kennedy on the other. Paige gives me a curious glance, but I know she won’t ask for details here. Kennedy, I’m disgruntled to discover, is staring at Ryder.

She’s not the only one.

We don’t have many new students at Fernwood, either returning or entirely. Kennedy is the only one since my arrival freshman year. Ryder’s return was bound to cause a stir. Even if he didn’t look like he came here directly from a male model convention.

He appears completely unbothered by the stares as he finishes his conversation with Mr. Anderson and strolls toward the rows of identical desks.

I’m disgruntled to realize I’m not. Especially the admiring ones.

Ryder chooses my row to enter the sea of desks. I don’t know if it’s intentional—I sat in the middle of the five, and at least six other students have also passed me by—but it *feels* intentional. I busy myself with pulling

the notebooks Kevin retrieved for me out of my backpack, but all that accomplishes is a close-up view of tan, muscular calves passing me by.

I straighten as soon as he passes, feeling flushed.

Class begins. Mr. Anderson doesn't start with introductions or any form of preamble. He launches right into the first lecture, dropping a stack of papers at the first seat in each row to be passed back. When I receive mine, I realize it's the course syllabus. I dawdle as I scan the first page, trying to avoid turning around until I have to. When I do, I keep my eyes on Holden Jones, passing him the stack with a small smile before spinning right back around.

Mr. Anderson continues mapping out the first topic of the semester—World War I—as I flip through the pages of the syllabus. Normally, I'd be taking careful notes by now. But calming myself down seems like a more pressing task at the moment.

As I page through bullet points on the New Deal, World War II, The Cold War, and the Vietnam War, I mull over how ironic it is History is the class I'd be confronted with Ryder in.

But that's *all* we share now.

History.

I receive a respite from Ryder in my next two classes, so of course he's the first person I see when I enter the cafeteria surrounded by most of the cheer squad. He's leaning against the soda dispenser, talking to Danielle Collins as she fills a cup. She's another resident of the trailer park and a fellow senior. I've never spoken to her before, but I've heard plenty. She's garnered a bit of a reputation among Fernwood's male population. Whether it's warranted is not something I've ever concerned myself with. Watching Ryder laugh at something she says has me considering it for the first time.

"Elle? You coming?" I shift my gaze to Paige, who's veered to the left, toward our usual table. My steps slowed without me realizing it.

"Yeah. Just going to grab a seltzer."

I split off from the rest of the group. I can't recall the last time I bought anything from the cafeteria. I always pack my own lunch. The cafeteria food is actually rumored to be decent, but I've never bothered to find out

for myself. I don’t lie to myself about why I’m exploring this part of the lunchroom now, albeit for a bottled beverage imported from Italy. I need to reestablish things with Ryder. Show him I’m as unbothered by his presence as I’d really like to be.

So, I breeze past where he’s still standing with Danielle as though he’s part of the cinderblock wall enclosing the cafeteria to grab a sparkling water from the cooler, glad he didn’t catch me staring earlier.

I get in line for the register behind Caroline Hawley. “Hey, Elle,” she greets.

“Hi, Caroline,” I reply, spinning the condensed bottle in my grip.

“I know we’ve got a Student Council meeting on Friday, but I think we should have a Homecoming Committee meeting sometime this week. I know everyone was hoping for the country club, but it seems like that may not be an option. I’d like to explore additional venues as soon as possible.”

I beat Caroline out for student council president freshman year, and each subsequent year since. She redirects her rejection by making every attempt to always be more prepared than I am. Kind of a win-win situation for me, honestly. And I’d never dare tell her I actually have no interest in being class president. I only ran for the position because it was expected I would.

“That’s fine, Caroline,” I reply. I’ll wait until the meeting to tell her I already secured the country club.

“Great. Can you do today?”

“Actually, no. I’ve got cheer and then a… meeting,” I say. Saying it’s a call with the dean of Yale seems too pretentious, even for me. Not to mention morally ambiguous, since as Paige pointed out earlier, I think I’m guaranteed to get in already.

“Fine. Tomorrow it is,” Caroline agrees, although she makes it sound like I’ve suggested pushing it back until next month.

Caroline pays for her food, and then I reach the register. I hand the cashier my student ID to swipe, and then turn to see Danielle and Ryder joined the line after me. Ryder glances at me and then away, appearing completely indifferent. There’s no hint of our encounter this morning. No comment about how I’m holding him up again.

It’s how we should act around each other, but as I pass him and start to head toward my usual table, I’m struck by just how much the lack of acknowledgement bothers me.

I *want* Ryder to talk to me.

An annoying realization, considering the whole reason I instigated the five-minute detour for an overpriced water was to reinforce the fact Ryder doesn't have any effect on me.

I take a seat next to Paige and twist off the top of my drink, taking a hasty swallow. The bubbles burn my throat as I gulp the seltzer hastily.

"What did Caroline want?" Paige asks, as I pull out my turkey sandwich.

"What do you think?" I reply dryly, taking a bite.

"Guessing you didn't tell her you already planned out and booked everything for Homecoming."

"Nope. I'll save that conversation for when there are witnesses."

"Ryder James doesn't count?"

I glance at her, then around the table to make sure no one is listening to our conversation. They aren't. Liam's talking sports with his football buddies, and the rest of our friends are watching something on Kinsley's phone.

"No. He doesn't count," I reply.

"Didn't seem that way in the hallway earlier," Paige persists.

Unfiltered curiosity burns in her voice. We've always shared the same group of friends in town. My familiarity with anyone she doesn't know here is understandably intriguing. The fact it's with a resident of the trailer park makes it all the more so.

I sigh and lower my voice to a whisper. "I did that project with him freshman year, remember?"

"Uh, no," Paige replies, rolling her eyes. "Why would I remember that?"

It's a fair point, which I acknowledge. "We were friendly, and then he just left. I was just surprised to see him earlier. Figured he was gone for good."

"Friendly?" Paige murmurs.

"Yeah," I admit, knowing what she's getting at.

"Wow. Who knew you had a thing for bad boys?" She replies, giving me a look that's almost impressed.

I roll my eyes and take another bite of my sandwich.

"We just kissed a couple times."

I decided a long time ago the full extent of my involvement with Ryder James freshman year is something I'd take to the grave. His return doesn't change that. Paige's never had sex. No way am I admitting—to her or anyone else—that I've slept with the guy who just pretended I am invisible.

Although his return does mean I need to make sure he shares the same mindset when it comes to keeping our past private.

Which is going to require having another conversation with him.

I wish it was a prospect I was a little less excited by.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWO

I take my time unbuttoning and unzipping, sliding the pink romper off my torso and down my legs slowly. I'm left in just my bra and underwear.

"Ready, Elle?" Kinsley Jones rounds the row of lockers, already wearing her school-issued gym uniform. She looks surprised to see me mostly undressed rather than ready to depart.

"Almost," I reply, pulling on the athletic shorts and a sports bra like I'm in slow motion.

"Dreading gym?" Kinsley asks with a sympathetic smile.

Yes. "No, just tired. I was up late working on that English essay."

I pull a *Fernwood Athletics* t-shirt on over my head, letting the soft cotton drop into place around my torso.

I'm not the most athletic. My slender frame can mostly be credited to a fast metabolism, not regular exercise. I have a good sense of rhythm and decent coordination, which is the main reason I'm not an embarrassment to the cheer squad.

I've never looked forward to gym class. But I've never been apprehensive about attending it before.

Not until yesterday, when I learned Ryder James is not only in my first period class, but also my seventh.

"You know it's only the second day of school, right?" Kinsley teases me. "That essay's not due until Monday."

"Yeah, I know," I confirm. "But I figured Paige's birthday is probably going to take up most of the weekend."

Kinsley laughs. "Yeah, that's probably right."

We head out into the gymnasium. It was just redone last year, but the scent of old sweat and ammonia hangs in the air, already overwhelming fresh paint, and varnished wood. My dawdling has made us the two final students to join the rest of the class, and Coach Jackson—the leader of our esteemed football team—marks our attendance off with a small shake of his head.

I pay close attention to his instructions for the start of class, mostly to keep my eyes from perusing the rest of the group. Unfortunately, after three years, I already know the second class is always spent completing a fitness test that's repeated on the final day, so I don't really need to pay attention.

Sure enough, we're sent off to the mats already spread across the varnished hardwood to see how many sit-ups we can complete in a minute. I learned a while ago the best way to ensure a good grade in gym is to make sure there's a healthy gap between the start of the year and end of the year fitness tests. Meaning I barely brush the bounds of exertion.

Unfortunately, not everyone employs that strategy. I—along with almost all of the class—stopped crunching our abs a while ago. But there are still three figures rising and falling from the mat. Ryder, and two of the boys I cheer for every Friday night. Both Steve and Jeff are red-faced and huffing, but Ryder seems unbothered by the exercise. Coach Jackson is surveying his two players with a proud grin, and everyone else is studying the guys as well.

"Do you think Ryder James is hot?" Kinsley whispers to me.

"What?" I reply, way too loudly.

"I know, I know. He's from the trailer park. And you're dating King Liam. But he's cute, right?"

"I guess so." Maybe miracles do exist because I manage to sound nonchalant.

"Kennedy was going on and on about him on the drive home from practice yesterday. But all's fair in fighting over a fling, right?" Kinsley grins.

"I guess so," I choke out. Suddenly, I'm viewing one of my closest friends as an opponent. Scrutinizing her through the lens of someone desperate to find fault. And losing my mind, obviously.

"Out on the track, everyone!"

The display of male prowess has ended, and I missed the outcome. Based on the disgruntled expressions on Steve and Jeff's faces, I think I

know who emerged victorious, though.

It's just as hot outside today as it was yesterday. August sun is streaming down atop the synthetic rubber that comprises the running track surrounding Fernwood High's football field. The springy surface feels as though it's bouncing the hot rays right back up at us as we meander toward the starting line to begin my least favorite part of the fitness test. Running in this heat sounds like something only a masochist would do.

Or a senior not willing to let a mediocre gym grade impact her perfect GPA.

I line up with everyone else, taking care to keep my distance from Ryder. He hasn't made any attempt to talk to me—hasn't so much as glanced at me—since our first encounter outside of History yesterday. There were no demeaning dawdling accusations spoken outside of Mr. Anderson's class this morning. Ryder merely took the same seat four rows behind me and stayed silent throughout the entire Roosevelt lecture.

I can't decide how I feel about it. Actually, that's a lie. It bothers me. I've spent the past twenty-four hours trying to convince myself it doesn't, because it *shouldn't*. Up until yesterday, I hadn't seen Ryder James in over two years. So what if we spent most of freshman year sneaking around? I'm a different person now. If I were to take the time to find out, I'm sure he's a different person now too.

So why am I sneaking glances at Kinsley to see if she's looking at him?

An excellent question I stop pondering when Coach Blake's whistle announces it's time to start running. Just like earlier, I don't make any attempt to act like I'm a varsity athlete, moving forward at what could generously be described as a jog. Kinsley stays with me despite the fact I know she goes running regularly. She's a good friend.

Not sure the same could be said for me, since I've spent the last five minutes wondering if Ryder would be able to tell she's a fake blonde. Based on his impatience with fashion yesterday, I'm certain he'd hold some derision for anyone who seeks out artificial chemicals to change their natural hair color.

Probably just wishful thinking on my part.

Four trips around the track, and I look like someone who made an effort, even though I didn't. Sweat trickles down between my shoulder blades and gathers in the ribbed hem of the sports bra I'm wearing underneath my t-shirt. Half of my hair has escaped from the ponytail I

hastily assembled prior to gym. I yank out the elastic as soon as I catch my breath.

Classmates start to trickle back toward the entrance to the gym, eager to return to air conditioning. I'm not one of them.

"Go ahead," I urge Kinsley. "I've got to talk to Coach Blake about coordinating something with the football team."

"Okay." She buys my excuse for lingering readily enough, and I turn, heading in the opposite direction from everyone else. Well, almost everyone. I already heard Coach Blake call out to Ryder to stay behind, which is the only reason I'm choosing to prolong my time surrounded by humid air being slowly baked by the sun.

I approach Coach Blake slowly, keeping my eyes on the lines of the track. There aren't any scuffs or smears. Straight white line after line marks my progress toward the football coach and the guy I seem incapable of ignoring. Or of allowing to ignore me, rather.

I assumed Coach Blake asked Ryder to remain behind to welcome him back to Fernwood High. Maybe to compliment him on his performance today. I'm not sure how Ryder plans to improve upon it for the final fitness test, but that's not my problem.

But as I near them, I hear they're discussing football.

"…just one practice?" Coach Blake is saying. "The team could really use you."

"I'm not interested," Ryder states firmly.

Coach Blake sighs, then looks up and spots me.

"Elle? Do you need something?"

"To talk to Ryder."

I was planning to instigate our conversation a little more subtly, but that's what comes flying out of my mouth.

Both of Coach Blake's eyebrows raise in surprise. Interestingly, Ryder does *not* appear surprised by my request. I ponder what that means as Coach Blake glances back and forth between the two of us.

"All right, then," he finally says. "Think it over, James."

The hard set of Ryder's jaw suggests he has no intention of doing so, but he nods.

One last look between us, and Coach Blake follows the line of students rapidly disappearing inside the gym.

Once again—still—my filter fails me. Before Ryder asks me why I'm instigating this conversation, before I even attempt to set a cordial tone, words stream out.

"I never told anyone about us."

I drop the words like an anvil. A challenge. An attempt to appear like I'm in complete control when it comes to him.

"Yeah, I figured," is the casual response. If he's surprised by my statement, it's hidden beneath a copious amount of indifference. Well hidden.

"Are you planning to?" I press.

Ryder snorts. "No."

I was worried he might think I'm ashamed of our past association. Now I'm worried *he* is.

"Okay, good."

"Good," he repeats, moving to walk past me.

The curiosity is too much. "So… where were you?"

He pauses to study me. "Down south."

"Florida?"

His lower lip quirks. Because I just let slip I kept track of the rumors about his absence?

"Something like that."

"Why did you leave Fernwood?"

More silent staring. I don't think he's going to answer this time. "My brother's dad took off," he finally says. We've never discussed our respective sets of parents, but I take note of how he says his brother's father, not his. "My mom—well, she can barely take care of herself. Two of us were too much. My uncle offered to help, and off I went."

"You didn't say goodbye."

"Yeah, I know." He doesn't apologize.

"Why did you come back?" Curiosity and accusation mix in my voice.

"I'm old enough to help out now." But there's more to it. I can read it in the way he glances away after answering.

"And?"

He meets my gaze again and gives me a wry smile, acknowledging my intuition. "My uncle was mixed up in some shit. It got… messy."

"By messy, you mean illegal?"

"Maybe," he admits.

“My mom’s cousin got arrested for selling prescription drugs last year,” I inform him. “He is—or was—a pharmacist.”

Ryder laughs, the first glimmer of any positive emotion when it comes to me. The husky sound warms my chest. “Okay.” His face relaxes into a grin.

“Just in case you thought you had the market cornered on family problems.” I mean the words as a joke, as an attempt to let him know I appreciate him answering my questions when I kind of expected him to just walk away. But I can tell from the way his jaw hardens that’s not how he took them, even before he speaks again.

“Yeah, Elle. Your life looks *real* tough. Endless sunshine must get exhausting.”

My temper rises to the challenge. “I’ve gotten some burns,” I snap.

I wasn’t sure if Ryder had heard about Sarah yet, but the way his face pales gives me the answer. “Elle, I didn’t mean—”

“It’s fine. We’re in agreement about the past. That’s all I wanted to make sure of.”

I stalk off as quickly as I can without appearing as though I’m angrily running away, even though I absolutely am.

I know my life appears pretty perfect. I know Ryder James is not the only one who thinks so. I also know that in comparison to his life, especially after what he just shared with me, my problems probably look an awful lot like clear skies. Families like mine are often sheltered from storms.

But his words didn’t just sound like a presumption.

They sounded like a judgment.

And for some reason, Ryder James’s judgment bothers me in a way no one else’s ever has.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

I park Betty in Paige's circular driveway and spin around to yank the overstuffed bags out of the backseat of my convertible. I was given the task of transporting the bottles of alcohol Kinsley's older brother bought for us. Neither of my parents gave the pile of bags a second glance, but I still felt obligated to throw a random assortment of stuff in to mask the glass bottles. A wireless speaker topples out of one bag as I climb out of the driver's seat.

"Need some help?" Kinsley appears beside me.

"That'd be great." I grab the speaker and shove it back into one of the totes. "Liam was supposed to be here by now to help haul this all inside."

"Pretty sure I saw his car at Malone's," Kinsley replies, referring to the local diner.

"Great," I grumble, tossing two bags over one shoulder.

"This all alcohol?" Kinsley laughs as she grabs a couple more.

"No. It's just three bottles and all the crap I thought I'd need to cover it up."

"*You* didn't need anything to cover it up, Elle. That's the whole reason we gave you the bottles."

"Yeah, I know," I respond.

For once, the reference to the fact I'm a famous goody two-shoes does more than irk me. It makes me feel like ants are crawling on my skin. I have a sudden, inexplicable urge to do something stupid. Unexpected. Uncharacteristic.

But I act the same as always as I step inside the soaring foyer that serves as the entrance to Paige's house. Kinsley and I drop the overflowing bags

on the shiny floor and pull out the three bottles of vodka that are the only valuable contents. I follow Kinsley out the French doors that lead to the patio. Everyone's gathered around the pool, claiming lounge chairs and unfurling streamers to drape around the yard.

Paige races over to us, wearing a pink sash spelling out *Birthday Girl* over her bikini.

"Yassss. Finally!" She grabs one of the bottles of vodka from me.

"Yeah, nice to see you, too," I grumble when she immediately turns around to head toward the table of drinks.

I follow her laugh over to the surface spread with a wide array of beverages.

Paige starts pouring straight away, handing me a full glass. I take a sip, discovering that a sizable portion of the liquid filling the cup seems to be alcohol. Warmth seeps down my esophagus, heating my stomach and flowing through my veins. I don't drink much. My tolerance is more nonexistent than just low.

I help distribute some decorations, and then plop down on the soft cushions of one of the lounge chairs. Last week's humidity has begun to abate, giving way to the barest hint of fall. A soft breeze ripples through manicured grass, loosening some of my hair from its bun.

More people start to trickle into the yard, including the football team. Liam comes and perches at the end of my chair, giving me an easy grin as he watches me spread sunscreen on my legs.

"Hey, babe."

"Hi," I reply. Despite the alcohol I've imbibed, some tension sneaks into my muscles. "Where have you been? You were supposed to pick me up."

"I know. Sorry. Guys wanted to get breakfast at Malone's, and you know how they are."

I glance over at the boisterous group of seniors on Fernwood's football team.

"Yeah, I do," I say. I'm not really annoyed Liam never showed up earlier. I'm annoyed I'm not annoyed. That I don't really care what he does or when he does it. "It's fine," I add because he's eyeing me warily in a way that suggests he doesn't know I'm actually indifferent.

"I'll make it up to you tomorrow," he offers.

"Uh-huh. Sure," I agree.

“Come on,” Liam hauls me up from the chaise. “I need a drink.”

We walk back over toward the table of drinks, where Paige’s holding court, clearly in her element. She grins as Liam and I reach the table.

“What can I get ya?” she asks, doing a pretty accurate imitation of a diner waitress for someone who I know has never held any sort of service job.

“Beer?” Liam requests.

Paige rolls her eyes. “This isn’t a backyard barbecue. Pick a cocktail.” She points to the list of options carefully printed on the chalkboard that, if I had to guess, was bought for the sole purpose of this party.

Liam squints at the list. “I guess I’ll take a Paul Revere Punch?” He says it more like a question than an order.

“Excellent choice,” Paige compliments, starting to splash together various liquids. I lose interest in her bartending, turning my gaze to the pool instead.

“What’s trailer trash doing here?” Liam suddenly asks.

I glance up to see Ryder James saunter through the open gate leading into Paige’s backyard.

Paige looks over as well. “Kennedy asked me if she could invite him. Think someone’s got a crush,” Paige sing-songs.

“On him?” Liam scoffs, disbelief heavy in the sound. But after eight months of dating, I’m well aware of the fact Liam only belittles those he’s threatened by. Apparently, Ryder qualifies.

“Don’t think she’s the only one,” Paige replies, looking straight at me.

I turn my gaze back toward the game of water basketball taking place in the pool. I’m pretty sure she’s referring to the fact Ryder James has been a frequent topic of conversation among the female half of Fernwood High this past week. Given Liam’s reaction, it must have had some discussion on the male side as well.

I also think she’s trying to ascertain *my* response to Ryder’s unexpected appearance.

Liam snorts as Paige hands him his punch. “Whatever. I’m going to play basketball. Want to come cheer, babe?”

“Maybe later,” I reply, still staring at the pool. Later, as in never. I get my fill of cheering for jocks on Friday nights.

Liam gulps the last of his drink and strolls off.

“Paige!” I recognize Kennedy’s cheery voice, and automatically stiffen. Because I’m pretty sure its nearby presence means Ryder is also close by.

I’m not wrong.

“Ryder, this is Paige Anderson,” Kennedy introduces.

“Happy Birthday.” I hear Ryder say. “It’s nice to meet you.”

I look over, and he’s smiling at my best friend. Politely. Reservedly. There’s no sign of the genuine grin he flashed me before our last conversation went up in flames, and I had no idea how much that mattered to me until I see the smaller upturn of his lips.

“And this is Elle Clarke,” Kennedy adds, and that green gaze slides to me.

I prepare myself for a detached pleasantry. Instead, Ryder smirks. “Yeah, I know.”

“Oh, okay then,” Kennedy replies, obviously surprised. And a bit annoyed if I’m reading her expression correctly.

Possibly that her introductions were unnecessary.

Probably because Ryder knows who I am, and if I had to guess, she was assuming he didn’t. Or didn’t care.

There’s a pause where we should say hello to each other, but we don’t.

“Do you want a drink?” Kennedy asks Ryder. “*Elle* smuggled the alcohol in, if you can believe it.”

“Actually, I can,” Ryder replies, and I glare at him, trying to ignore the heat I can feel flooding my cheeks. “But no, I’m good.”

“Okay,” Kennedy responds, not missing a beat. “Come on. I’ll introduce you to Jessica and Amanda. Bye, girls!”

“Bye,” Paige says as Kennedy pulls Ryder away. I don’t say anything.

As soon as they’re out of earshot, Paige snorts. “Wow.”

I still don’t say anything.

“Wow,” Paige repeats.

“What?” I snap, taking a sip of my drink.

“Elle Clarke, you’re in tro-uble.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She slants a side glance at me as Kinsley approaches us. “Yeah, you do.”

“Damn, I have no idea what you put in this, but it is *good*. Load me up again.” Kinsley plops her plastic cup down on the table serving as a temporary bar top with a wide grin.

I take advantage of the interruption to head for the perimeter of the pool, taking a seat on the cement surrounding the water and dipping my toes in the cool liquid. The basketball game is taking place in the opposite end, so my view of the water is clear of any splashing or swashing.

It's peaceful. Relaxing. Calming.

Until someone sits down beside me.

I don't need to look over to see who it is. I can tell based on how my stomach flips. How I'm filled with excitement yet simultaneously bracing for confrontation.

"I'm sorry," Ryder states.

His apology is unexpected, but I recover quickly. "It's fine."

"I shouldn't have—"

"I said *it's fine*, Ryder."

He's silent, and I'm still stubbornly staring at the water, so I have no idea how he took my refusal to discuss his simple dismissal of my life.

"So… you settled for the quarterback?"

Now I look over at him. He's leaning back on his palms, studying me with his head tilted to the side. I can barely make out the shade of shamrock assessing me under the shaded brim of his faded ball cap.

"Jealous, James?"

"Of spending time with Liam Hathaway?" Ryder scoffs. "No."

"Of him spending time with me." I lean back, mirroring his pose.

Emerald eyes appraise me. "Do you? *Spend time* with him?"

I flush. "That's none of your business."

"That's a 'no,'" Ryder replies confidently.

I glare at him. "I wouldn't tell you even if—" I start heatedly, then stop when I realize I just told him exactly what he wanted to know.

He grins. "What did I tell you?"

"Kennedy isn't too sunny for you?" I snap back, flustered.

Ryder grins. "Jealous, Clarke?"

I am. I'm annoyed with Ryder, my boyfriend is on the other end of this pool, and I'm painfully jealous he's here because another girl invited him. I don't say anything, but the truth must be scrawled across my face because Ryder's amusement fades.

"I didn't come here because of Kennedy," he informs me.

My chest suddenly feels less tight, and I don't let myself analyze why that might be.

“Then why are you here?” I question.

“Because I knew you would be.” He looks straight at me, not giving me a chance to hide from the admission.

“So?” I manage.

“*So*, I wanted to apologize.”

“You came to a birthday party just to tell me you’re sorry?”

“Yup.”

“Huh,” is my witty response. “Nothing better to do this weekend?” I add when he doesn’t say anything.

He chuckles, and my stomach clenches. “Just a gap in the schedule. I’ve got someplace to be at four.”

“ELLE!” I glance across the pool to see Liam beckoning me over, glancing at the guy sitting next to me with clear annoyance.

“One minute,” I call back. “It’s only just after three,” I challenge Ryder.

“Impressive time-telling,” he informs me. “I’ve got a bit of a drive ahead of me.”

“Is it something… messy?” I ask.

Ryder studies me, his jaw working a couple times. “Not supposed to be.”

He moves to stand, and I grab his forearm without thinking. Ryder glances down at my pink-tipped fingers wrapped around his lower arm, surprise sketched in the lines of his expression.

“Be careful,” I tell him. Just like the impromptu movement, I don’t bother to mask the naked earnestness in my voice.

“I will.”

“Do you promise?”

Ryder shakes his head, looking a little bemused. A bit incredulous. A tad annoyed.

“Yeah. I promise.”

In one smooth motion, he stands and strides away, only pausing to say something to Kennedy, who’s sitting on the chaise lounges with a few of the other cheerleaders. I look back down at my feet, watching my calves swish through the cool, chlorinated water.

Wishing Ryder promising me anything didn’t mean quite so much.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOUR

I turn Betty down the unfamiliar road, bouncing with each jolt of the car's suspension. Sad, tired surroundings greet me as the tires roll closer to the end of the dirt lane. Signs covered with peeling white paint are the only decoration in what could generously be described as front yards, and I park beside the one denoting the address the school secretary reluctantly handed to me.

I step out of my convertible, glancing around nervously. My car stands out like a drop of blood in pristine snow. So do I. Grass has been scuffed down to its roots in the center of the front yard, and I follow the attempt at a path up to the front of the trailer, gingerly climbing the stairs to knock on the door.

"What?" The flimsy door bangs open, revealing a woman. Her hair is a muddy shade of brown styled half-up and half-down. Not in a purposeful way, but as though she pulled it up a while ago and gravity has slowly been working away at it ever since. She's wearing skinny jeans and a tight tank top her cleavage is practically spilling out of.

"Hello," I say politely. Her face screws up, exacerbating the lines already creasing the skin around her eyes and mouth. I'd guess she's in her mid-thirties, but she has the troubled appearance of someone much older. Who's lived through a lot—little of it pleasant.

She doesn't repeat the greeting, letting us marinate in awkward silence.

"Is Ryder home?"

"You sleeping with my son?" Crystalline green eyes I've only ever seen on one other person narrow.

I blush at her brash question. "Uh, no."

“Good. You look like the type to get attached.” Most definitely not a compliment.

“Is Ryder here?” I try again.

“No.”

“Do you know when he’ll be back?”

“No.”

Extracting information from this woman is like squeezing a desiccated lemon.

“Okay,” I sigh. “Thanks.” For nothing.

The door bangs shut without another word. I sigh again, turning to head back to my car. I’m halfway back to the half-dead stretch of grass where I parked when I see a truck that looks exactly like the sort of vehicle Ryder James would drive pull between the rusty fridge and stack of bald tires marking the entrance to the trailer park. Ryder’s truck rumbles to a stop next to my car, the trail of dust it raised drifting off into nothingness.

He’s not alone in the cab. There’s a younger boy sitting beside him, probably twelve or thirteen, if I had to guess. As soon as the deafening engine quiets, the boy jumps out of the passenger seat.

“Well, *hello* there,” he drawls.

I already surmised they must be related, even though they look very little alike, that line confirmed it. My status is thanks to my last name and family’s net worth. Ryder’s confidence seems to be intrinsic. And hereditary.

“Hi,” I reply, giving a dorky little wave I immediately regret.

“*Wicked* car,” the boy announces, shoving back some of his shaggy, sandy hair, presumably in an attempt to get a better look at my red convertible.

“Thanks,” I respond, smiling at his blatant admiration.

“Can I drive it?”

The driver’s side door of the truck opens and closes.

“Aren’t you a bit young to drive?” I ask amusedly.

“Christopher. Go inside,” Ryder states.

“Don’t really feel like it,” Christopher replies. He leans against the bumper of Ryder’s truck. Kid’s not lacking in confidence, that’s for sure.

“It wasn’t a request,” Ryder snaps.

“Why? She your girlfriend, or something?”

“Inside, or I won’t take you to the garage for two weeks.”

Christopher heaves out a sigh, but it's an effective threat. "Way to ruin my fucking life."

"Language," Ryder yells after Christopher's retreating back. A second slam of the trailer's front door is the only response.

"Sweet kid," I comment, shifting my gaze to Ryder for the first time. It's only been three days since I last saw him, but my eyes feast on the sight of him hungrily as though it's been months. Years.

Muscular forearms I've spent a number of unproductive minutes staring at in the short time he's been back in Fernwood are smeared with what I think is grease. The same tar-like substance mars the fabric of the distressed jeans and white undershirt he's currently wearing. Ryder pulls off his ball cap to run a hand through his messy brown hair and then replaces it with the brim facing backwards. I swallow as I'm met with his harsh gaze.

"You shouldn't be here."

"You weren't in school," I retort, matching his combative tone.

"So?"

An excellent question. Ryder not showing up for school today shouldn't matter to me. But I was worried Saturday's activities had turned out to be messy. Concerned he might have packed up and left again. I don't share either of those truths.

"*So*, I brought you what you missed."

"Great, so I'll have no excuse for not having it tomorrow?"

The question is caustic. He's in a bad mood, and I should take it as a sign to get out of this place where I don't belong with this boy who clearly doesn't want me here.

I stay in place.

"You're welcome," I toss back, staying in place.

"Fine, give me it." He takes a few angry strides toward me and holds out a hand.

I pull the sheet of notebook paper I wrote all of his assignments on out of my backpack and hand it to him. He scans the list. "I don't have—"

I hand him our history textbook and math workbook. Ryder raises both eyebrows. "You broke into my locker?"

"Once again, *you're welcome*."

"Miss Perfect committed a felony?"

"Breaking and entering is a misdemeanor," I respond.

"Already studying for the bar? Daddy must be so proud."

I ignore the dig. “Where were you today?”

“Went on a cruise, stole some cars, robbed a bank.”

“Where were you, Ryder?”

“Hard to recall. I’m still recovering from the news you’re not a goody two-shoes.”

“You already knew that, *remember*?”

Ryder sucks in a sharp breath in response to my reference to our past. “Don’t come back here again, Elle.”

“Don’t skip school again, Ryder.”

A brown dog slinks around the corner of the trailer and approaches us hesitantly, like it’s drawn to our raised voices rather than poised to flee the way any animal who senses anger tends to do.

“You have a dog?”

“He’s just a stray,” Ryder replies.

“He seems to know you.” The dog reaches us. It eyes me nervously but rubs its head against Ryder’s calf.

“Ryder!” The door bangs open, and the same woman who helpfully told me absolutely nothing eyes us. “I need your help.” Her gaze shifts to me, then the dog. “If you stopped feeding that mutt, maybe he’d go shit food meant for us in someone else’s yard for once.”

There’s another bang, and the door shuts.

Ryder doesn’t say anything, but the same jaw muscles that always seem to get a good workout in around me jump a couple of times. I zip my backpack up again and start toward Betty, taking my time walking back to the convertible. Hoping he’ll say something else.

Tell me where he was.

Thank me for coming.

Show me a glimpse of the guy who came to Paige’s birthday.

But the trailer park remains silent and empty as I climb inside the car and start driving to the part of town where I’m from.

“Do we think there’s a chance we’ll win tonight?” Paige plops down on the grass beside me to stretch her hamstrings.

I send her a dubious glance. “Does it make me a bad captain and a terrible girlfriend if I tell you we have no chance?”

“Probably.”

I roll my eyes and stand, turning my gaze to the football field to glance between Fernwood High’s green huddle and Thompson High’s blue one. “Then there’s a two percent chance? Maybe?”

“You’re a bad captain and terrible girlfriend,” Paige informs me, laughing.

“It’s not *my* fault our football team is incapable of scoring touchdowns,” I retort.

The two huddles break, indicating the start of the game. I move into position on the sideline, although from experience I know the squad won’t have anything to do until our half-time performance. Thompson High’s football team is one of the best in the state. Two percent was a generous estimate of our odds, to be honest.

Sure enough, Thompson manages to score three touchdowns in the span of time it takes us to reach half-time. Green jerseys trudge off the field with their shoulders slumped. I lead the cheer squad out onto the field and the crowd of Fernwood fans finally perks up as we start our routine.

I actually love cheering. I joined the squad because Sarah did, because it was expected of me. But I’ve always enjoyed dancing, and cheer provides a similar outlet. The same rhythm, the same structure, the same bliss of being lost in movement and unable to think.

The second half of the game drags. Fernwood improves their performance in the rest of the game, only allowing one more touchdown. But the 28-0 lighting up the scoreboard leaves no illusion we didn’t just get trounced.

I groan as I grab my pom-poms and jacket, already dreading the post-game party held every Friday night. I have no doubt Liam is going to be in a terrible mood. As someone who thrives on being revered and respected, I know his lack of skill when it comes to football is a perennial source of embarrassment to him. He should quit the team, but it’s not like we have a Tom Brady waiting in the wings. Plus, quitting would bring about its own form of mortification.

I change in the locker room with the rest of the squad, taking a seat on one of the wooden benches to wait for everyone else to finish getting ready.

Primping and preening over my appearance doesn't sound appealing. There's no one I'm trying to impress tonight.

Paige is one of the last to get ready. We trail after the rest of the girls heading toward the parking lot. It was overflowing earlier; now there's no more than a dozen cars left. Liam's Mercedes is gone. We normally drive to the post-game party together, but it looks like I'll be bumming a ride from Paige.

She realizes the same. "You need a ride?"

"Apparently."

I climb in the passenger side of her SUV. Loud pop music assaults my ears as soon as Paige turns the car on, but neither of us bother to turn it down. After twelve years of friendship, I know Paige likes her music as loud as possible. I'm normally the one trying to preserve our sense of hearing, but I'm worried she might ask about Liam if I turn it down. Or worse, Ryder. The told-you-so looks she gave me for the rest of her birthday following our pool-side conversation were bad enough.

As we wind along the dark streets of Fernwood, my phone vibrates with a message. I pull it out to see a text from my mother. It's a reminder they'll be staying at our townhouse in the city tonight following the gala they're attending tonight. A warning wrapped in maternal concern.

Paige parks crookedly along the curb in front of Jack Rodger's house. We walk up the brick path illuminated by tiny lamps lining the edge and inside the house busting with bodies, booze, and blatant disregard for personal space.

I've been to dozens of high school parties by now, possibly hundreds. The scent of sweat swirling around with overpriced perfume and cologne is familiar. The sound of excited voices mingling with suggestive music is expected. The sight of scanty outfits and styled hair is predictable.

Anticipation thrums through the room, too. There's the thrilling possibility of a crush acknowledging you. The chance to mingle with the popular crowd. The ability to contribute to the gossip that will no doubt be flying through the halls of Fernwood High come Monday morning.

Belonging is a heady feeling—especially when you're in high school.

I grew immune to this atmosphere a while ago. Just like at school, I know exactly what to expect when I step inside a party. There's no suspense about what will happen or how I'll be received.

My classmates don’t disappoint. As soon as Paige and I step through the door, they swarm, drifting toward us like we’re exuding a gravitational pull. The shift in the room ripples throughout it, drawing my attention to the solitary two figures that don’t attempt to move closer.

Ryder James is here.

Leaning against the wall sipping a bottle of beer and listening to something Danielle Collins is saying as if she knows the secrets of the universe.

My first, embarrassingly vain thought? I should have taken the time to glimpse at my appearance rather than sprawl out on the locker room bench. The possibility he might be here never even occurred to me. School spirit and social status seem to be two things Ryder avoids like the plague. Plenty of both are present tonight.

Green eyes meet mine, and it feels like all the oxygen has been sucked out of the room. I keep my face blank as I internally try to sort through the many emotions his presence elicits. We haven’t exchanged so much as a brief glance—never mind the prolonged eye contact we’re engaging in right now—since he unceremoniously grabbed the assignments I brought over to his trailer.

He hasn’t skipped school once in the past two weeks since then. Either whatever he was doing instead that Monday hasn’t come up again, or he took my threat of showing up again if he did seriously. Pretty sure it’s the former.

I look away first. Not because I want to, but because Kennedy has apparently been trying to talk to me for a while. There’s a touch of impatience in her voice when she asks me if I know where Liam is. I shake my head, and wonder if she’s seen that Ryder is here. Unfortunately, I’m fairly certain I’m the only one at this party so painstakingly aware of his presence.

But that doesn’t mean his presence has gone entirely unnoticed. I’ve seen Danielle at some of these parties before, which has served as the impetus for most of the rumors about her. This is the first time I’ve ever seen her here with a fellow occupant of the trailer park, though. I’m not sure if the side glances are because of that fact alone, or the fact that Ryder is still a novelty three weeks into the fall semester, but everyone is behaving as though there’s an invisible bubble around the two seniors leaning against the wall.

Paige and I migrate toward the kitchen, with our fan club close behind. I feel her eyes on me as we pass Ryder, but I don't meet them. She hasn't brought up Ryder again since her birthday party, and I hope it's a trend that continues. I can't decide—or admit—how I feel about him to myself. Trying to put that into words, even to my best friend, is not something I can or want to attempt to do.

The kitchen is filled with more people to greet. I lose track of Paige as I chat with peer after peer. I eventually reach the kitchen island, which is spread with a wide array of drink options. I settle on a soda, not really in the mood to drink any alcohol despite knowing I won't be met with any disapproving stares when I arrive home tonight.

I've just cracked the seal on the can when Kinsley appears next to me.

"Elle!"

"What?" I take a sip, and then swing my gaze to her. There's a strange mixture of dread and uncertainty on her face I'm surprised to see.

"Uh—Stephanie was just upstairs with Connor."

"Good for her." I take another swig from the can and hold it out. "Can you hold this for me? I have to pee."

"They walked in on Danielle. With… Liam."

"Oh." I wait for the shock. Anger. Betrayal. Anything. Instead, I'm simply surprised Danielle migrated upstairs so quickly. It can't have been more than fifteen minutes since I saw her in the living room with Ryder.

Kinsley studies me sympathetically, possibly expecting me to burst into tears at any moment. Is that the expected response in this situation?

Liam chooses this exact moment to enter the kitchen. His brown eyes are wide as they glance around the room, clearly looking for someone. For me. Guilt swamps his expression when he spots me leaning against the island, with Kinsley at my side. He hurries over to us.

"Elle!" he calls, drawing some attention. Is he thinking I'm going anywhere?

I simply stare at him when he reaches us, still waiting for some devastated emotion to materialize.

Nope. Still nothing.

"Heard you were upstairs with Danielle," I finally state nonchalantly.

Liam doesn't seem to realize the indifference isn't faked because he still looks panicked. "You—it didn't—I mean—" Liam fumbles.

It’s entertaining to watch him squirm, but I also don’t care enough to see him uncomfortable. A somewhat disconcerting realization, seeing as we’ve been dating for the past eight months.

“Yes or no, Liam?” I cut in. His face tells me the answer, even though he doesn’t verbalize it. “Okay, then.”

His expression morphs to an amusing mixture of confusion and disbelief.

“*Okay*? We’re… good?”

“Yup.” I nod. “We’re great. Have fun hooking up with your new girlfriend.”

Understanding dawns on Liam’s face. By good, I mean over. He thought I’d play the role of the “good wife” and protect us.

A flash of motion catches my attention out of the corner of my eye. Ryder’s just entered the kitchen. I start walking toward the doorway, not caring it’s going to put me right in his path. Everyone in the kitchen is watching this scene unfold, and I’m over it. For the second time tonight, I’ve been confronted with the unexpected, and it’s making me miss the expected. For once.

“Elle!” Liam follows me. “Elle! It was a mistake, okay? It won’t ever happen again. She means nothing to me. Nothing at all.”

My life has turned into a cheesy teen sitcom plot.

I spin back around. “I don’t care, Liam. We’re done.”

“What? We can’t be! We’re perfect together. Everyone expects—”

“I don’t care what everyone expects. I’m done. Feel free to hook up with whoever you want. Or spend some more time practicing football so my squad can actually cheer for a winning team!”

Liam’s face turns an ugly shade of puce, but his voice is still cajoling. “You’re mad. I get it. Please, just talk to me.”

“I’m not mad. I just don’t have anything left to say to you.”

Kinsley stands silently by, watching our exchange just as closely as everyone else in the immediate vicinity. No one wants to intervene in the meltdown of Fernwood’s golden couple.

Malice twists Liam’s handsome features as it finally seems to register that I really mean what I’m saying. “Fine,” he snaps, in a harsh tone I’ve never heard from him before. “Just know most guys would have gone to Danielle a lot sooner. No girl, no matter how hot she is, is worth waiting that long for. You barely even let me—”

One moment Liam's slurring out insults. The next he's flat on the floor, holding a bloody nose. I don't need to look over to see who gave it to him.

There's only one person in Fernwood who would punch Liam Hathaway.

Who would actually defend me, despite the pedestal everyone put me on a long time ago.

Liam scrambles to his feet, wiping blood from his nostrils and glaring at Ryder. "You fucking—" Comically, he glances to me. Either he's too conditioned not to swear in front of me, or he's still holding on to some false hope I'll forgive him if he keeps up the perfect guy charade. "You'll pay for that, James."

"Bring it, Hathaway," Ryder retorts. He's got several inches and more than a few pounds of muscle on Liam. He also appears totally sober, which is more than can be said for my ex-boyfriend.

Testosterone chokes the air around me at the two guys stare at each other.

It's completely silent in the kitchen, and the lack of noise is starting to spread through the rest of the house. It's an open layout on the first floor, and my classmates are taking advantage of the fact the rest of the lower level provides a view of the kitchen. I'm no stranger to being the center of attention, but the scrutiny feels especially claustrophobic right now.

"Can you drive me home?" I ask Ryder.

He glances down at me, his tense posture loosening some.

"Are you kidding me, Elle?" Liam asks angrily.

I ignore him. "Ryder?"

"Yeah," he replies quietly.

"Elle! Seriously? You're going off with trailer trash? Worried I'll return the favor?" Liam wipes his nose.

"No, I'm leaving with *Ryder*, because I'm worried about *your* face. And that's really all you've got going for you, so…"

That comment breaks through the shocked silence. There are a few titters from the crowd, and Liam's face flushes. I brush past him, not waiting to see if Ryder's following me.

"If you leave with him then we're done!" Liam calls out after me. His voice is full of bravado, but I can hear the desperation buried deep beneath. He's also staking us on our joint reputation, which proves he doesn't really know me. At all.

“Promise?” I yell back as I push through the crowd gathered around the kitchen. Once they realize the show is over, they start to part pretty quickly. Or maybe it’s the presence behind me. I don’t need to turn around to know that Ryder is right behind me. I’m definitely *not* bothered by Liam’s betrayal because I’m numb, because right now, I’m the furthest thing from apathetic.

Awareness races across my skin and ricochets inside my stomach as I open the front door and step outside into the cool night air.

“Holy shit,” I breathe when we’re back on the path that leads to the sidewalk. “That just happened, right?” I know it did, my imagination is nowhere near that creative, but I need Ryder to acknowledge it.

He does. “Got the bruised knuckles to prove it.”

“Thank you,” I tell him.

“For punching Hathaway? My pleasure.”

I nod.

“You actually need a ride home, or was that an excuse to get out of there?”

“I actually need a ride home,” I admit. “Paige picked me up for the game earlier. But I can ask someone else…” I half-turn back toward the house, giving him a clean out.

“Nah, it’s fine. I was over it anyway. Come on.” Ryder starts toward the street. We start walking down the sidewalk. Side by side. For the first time since he’s returned, we’re completely alone, and I’m painfully aware of it.

Ryder stops at his truck, and I have the chance to survey his vehicle up close. It’s what an unbiased observer would probably consider to be better suited for a junkyard than a side street, but it fits Ryder somehow. It’s straightforward, just like him. What you see is what you get. Except I’ve always viewed Ryder as having a hidden side. With layers I think I glimpsed freshman year, but I haven’t been able to discern whether they’ve disappeared since or are just better hidden now.

I climb into the passenger side, onto a cloth seat that smells like chewing tobacco. Ryder cranks his window down, and the scent of fresh night air replaces it. Unlike in Paige’s car, there’s no burst of noise when he turns the key in the ignition. No music—either assaulting the eardrums or as mere background noise.

Neither of us breaks the silence as he pulls away from the curb and starts driving down the street.

“You didn’t come with Danielle?” I finally ask.

He slants a glance my way, but I keep my eyes forward. I’m well aware I just acknowledged I spotted him before he entered the kitchen. That I maybe care why he was at that party and who he was with.

“She’ll get home fine,” is all he says.

More silence, and then I continue my trend of saying exactly what I’m thinking for the first time in a long time.

“Can we stop at the treehouse?”

He glances over at me, and I meet his eyes this time. “You want to go to the field?”

“Unless they’ve moved the treehouse, that was the idea, yeah.”

“Didn’t…” I’m stupidly relieved he’s more concerned that I have negative feelings toward the field because of my family, not because he doesn’t want to go there with me.

“My sister wrap her car around a tree there?” I finish. “Yeah.”

“Seems like a place you’d want to avoid.”

“I started avoiding it before that happened,” I tell him honestly, losing any filter entirely. Good thing I’m completely sober, or who knows what might come out of my mouth next. “She died. That field just happened to be where it happened.”

Ryder doesn’t say anything else, but he does take the turn that will lead us straight past the field. Five minutes later, we arrive.

I haven’t been back here since the last time we met here freshman year. Terrible as it sounds, Sarah dying here was the best possible excuse I could have come up with for avoiding ever coming to this field again. Prior to that, it was sometimes a challenge to find reasons not to attend the get-togethers often held here. Returning here with Ryder was a possibility that never occurred to me once in the past two years.

He parks his truck on the very edge of the growth that marks the start of the field. There haven’t been any parties held here since my older sister died. I’d say it is out of respect for her memory, but I think it’s more because no one wants to hold a party I might not attend. Having it here makes that a distinct possibility.

Ryder doesn’t make any attempt to climb out of his truck, so I make the first move. With a cringe-worthy squeal the passenger side door opens. I climb out into weeds that reach up to my knees. A similar sound indicates

Ryder followed my lead. I pick my way through the undergrowth dotted with wildflowers over to the massive maple that the treehouse is perched in.

"It looks higher than before, right?" I ask Ryder, who's right behind me. "Which is stupid because we're taller now. Or at least you are."

I take a moment to admire his physique. It's a full moon tonight, and he's standing in a spot free from shadows.

Ryder scrutinizes me back, his brow wrinkling. "Are you drunk?"

I laugh. "Nope," I pop the P. "Stone cold sober. Another thing Sarah ruined for me."

"Your sister was drinking?"

"Yeah. More alcohol than blood in her veins, according to the coroner's report. Not that my parents let that see the light of day. Not sure what else they thought people would think, though. Sober people don't normally race at a tree like it's just another stretch of open road."

"Did she have a problem with drinking?" Ryder asks.

"I don't know," I admit. "Sarah was… complicated. She was the sun and the storm. Up one day, down the next. We'd always gone to different private schools until high school. When we were freshmen, she'd act like the perfect sister at school, and like I didn't exist at home. She was robotic at times, and others… She took me dress shopping for Homecoming. We were going into the city, on the highway, and all of a sudden, she just started speeding. Racing along. We were going a hundred miles an hour—maybe more. It—well, it scared the shit out of me. Sometimes… I wonder if that was how it felt when she crashed. When you're moving that fast, things start to slow down. I wonder if she saw it coming."

"Do you think she meant to do it?" Ryder asks the one question I've asked myself every day since the two officers that comprise the Fernwood Police Department came to our door in the middle of the night. The one question I'm sure every person in town has thought. Ryder's the first one to ever verbalize it.

"I don't know," I whisper.

He breaks the heavy moment by nodding to the wooden ladder. "Ladies first."

I start climbing, eager to leave the depressing topic of my sister behind. Anxious to be back in the treehouse with him. Despite the fact it's a rickety, old structure, it's one of the few places in the world I feel entirely safe. I

reach the top rung and haul myself onto floorboards littered with leaf debris. It’s obvious no one has been up here in a while.

Ryder's head appears through the opening in the floor, and I scootch backward so he can climb inside.

“Brings back some memories, huh?” I tease. Because we both know what memories I’m talking about.

Ryder glances at me, both eyebrows raised.

“Can I ask you something?” I ask.

There’s a pause. “Sure.”

“It might make you mad,” I warn.

He doesn’t say anything, but curiosity burns in his gaze as he gives me a short nod.

“It’s about your dad.”

Surprise flashes across his face. I’m pretty sure he was expecting me to bring more *memories* up.

“What about him?” he questions cautiously.

“You mentioned Christopher’s dad, but not yours. Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” Ryder says.

“Was he around before you left?” I press.

Ryder and I never discussed his family during our freshman year fling. He never brought it up, and I was too uncomfortable to do so myself. The difference in our home lives was already glaringly obvious based on our respective addresses. It wasn’t because I didn’t want to know more about him. I just didn’t know what to ask or how to ask it.

The trip to his trailer and explanation for his two-year absence provided me my first glimpse of his background. I’m eager to know more and being alone with him is not a regular occurrence. Right now is my best—maybe only—chance of peeling back some more layers.

“Before we moved here,” Ryder finally answers.

“Before you moved here?” I never asked, but I assumed Ryder has always lived in Fernwood and our paths didn’t cross until freshman year because our social circles were far too removed until my shift to public school took place.

“My dad went to prison when I was eleven. That’s when we moved here to live with my uncle. He headed south a few months later—we stayed here.”

“The same uncle from Florida?”

“Yeah.”

“Why did your dad go to prison?” I ask softly. The words are barely a whisper. I’m treading on ice—thin, thin ice—and well aware I could fall through at any moment.

“Drugs.” There’s no pause before Ryder answers. “He ran a pretty big operation. Took a while for it to catch up with him. He’s probably still in prison. If not, he hasn’t bothered to let me know.”

“Were you close with him?” I ask, and there’s a flash of surprise clearly illuminated in the moonlight. I’m guessing that’s not the first question people usually have following a revelation like that.

“Yeah,” Ryder answers, matching my quiet tone. “I was.”

The words aren’t harsh, but there’s a clear undercurrent of finality. He doesn’t want to talk about it anymore. He’s already given me far more than I expected him to, so I let it drop.

Unfortunately, being around Ryder in silence is dangerous for me. Without conversation to distract me, I am forced to confront my attraction to him head on. It’s worse in the moonlight. In what feels like the middle of nowhere.

All I can focus on is him.

My heart beats faster. Adrenaline journeys through my veins, sharpening my senses and making me feel as though I’ve just downed some illicit coffee. I feel alive. Aware of everything. Worried about nothing.

So, impulsively, I lean over and kiss him. White hot lust races through me, heating my blood and wreaking havoc on my hormones.

Ryder James was not my first kiss. I doubt he’ll be my last. But I know he’ll always be *the* kiss. The one I think of and will want to relive. Over and over and over again. But right now, I’m not reliving. I’m living. I don’t realize how much of a difference there is until I become consumed by the distinction.

Something about him—how different he is, how dynamic, how forbidden—has always stirred desire in me in a way no one else ever has. When he’s around he’s all I can think about. Focus on. Care about.

And that sensation is tripled tenfold when we’re kissing.

When I realize he’s kissing me back.

His tongue swipes mine, hot and seeking and urgent, as he eases me back onto the wooden boards. That’s the other thing about Ryder. He’s dominant. Controlling. Even when we were fooling around freshman year,

there was the undeniable sense of control. Having met his brother and mother the other day, hearing about his father just now, I have a newfound sense of where those instincts might come from.

The arms I've spent an unhealthy amount of time admiring pull me closer, and I let out a little gasp. If there's such a thing as arm porn, Ryder's a prime example. Toned tendons and strong ligaments covered with tan skin interrupted with maps of veins. They're impressive to look at. Less superficially and more importantly, his arms make me feel as safe as the structure I'm lying upon. Cherished. Protected.

I run my hands upward simultaneously, marveling over the muscles shifting under my palms. I follow the curve of his shoulder, the column of his neck, and then weave my hands into hair that feels as soft as it looks. I rake my fingers through the strands the way I've seen Ryder do himself so many times, and he bites down on my bottom lip.

Beneath the desire and déjà vu are fresh sensations. Maybe because the body hovering above mine feels so much more solid and masculine than the last time we were in a position like this. Maybe because I've spent the past eight months dating a guy I never once felt like this around. Maybe because I was awfully uncertain about how Ryder James felt about me, and I'm a little surer with his tongue in my mouth.

My hands leave his hair to trace down the slope of his back. I hesitate when I reach his waist, torn between yanking his t-shirt up or dipping into the waistband of his shorts.

Ryder doesn't give me a chance to do either.

He pulls back abruptly, rising to his elbows, then palms, then fully upright. "We should go. It's getting late."

Not sure how he knows that, since he hasn't glanced at his phone since we got here, but I'm too taken aback to say it aloud.

"You don't want to have sex?" I ask, incredulously. Maybe if he hadn't just been eagerly tongue-fucking my mouth, I wouldn't be so surprised by his sudden interest in the time. His sudden lack of interest in me.

Rather than answer my question, he just says "It's getting late," again.

"I don't have anyplace better to be."

"I do."

Ouch. "Why did you kiss me back?" I challenge.

"It seemed like you were having a bad night," he replies, running his fingers through his hair. All it does is remind me of just doing the same

thing myself. It's a sad testament to how attracted I am to him that even in the midst of his rejection, I'm still wishing I could be doing that again right now.

"Yeah, I am. My boyfriend broke up with me because I wouldn't have sex with him. Yet you've suddenly got places to be before either of us is naked?"

"A pity kiss is one thing. A pity fuck's another."

"Wow. Don't hold back now." I jerk upright myself, not bothering to hide my annoyance or anger. Yeah, I'm pissed.

Liam hooking up with another girl one floor above me? Not ideal. Liam announcing that fact to most of the senior class in a desperate attempt to ensure his cheating wasn't the end of our relationship? Wish it hadn't happened. Ryder James losing interest in me? I'm seeing red.

Hopefully Ryder thinks it's some sort of delayed reaction to the scene in the kitchen.

Maybe it is. I hope it is. Because Ryder James is one of the last people I should allow to have this level of control over me. For a whole host of reasons.

I brush past him, descending the ladder as quickly as I can. Where's a door to slam when you really need one? Not only is this a far cry from a dramatic exit, I also had the brilliant idea to ask Ryder to drive me home. Back when he was punching people for me, not abandoning me to do who-the-fuck-knows-what. Whatever. I try and fail to convince myself I don't care. Car rides can be silent, and despite my currently abysmal track record, being around Ryder does *not* require me to converse with him.

I start striding for Ryder's truck as soon as my feet brush grass, not bothering to wait for him to descend the ladder after me. But I feel his presence behind me seconds later, a silent shadow radiating disapproval. What does *he* have to be mad about? If I hadn't just decided to give him the silent treatment, I would ask.

I'm halfway to the truck when my flip-flop snags on a stray branch hidden under an overgrown weed. I pitch forward, barely remaining vertical and losing the flip-flop in the process. Does Ryder stop? Nope. He keeps walking toward the truck, not saying a word. I huff out a breath and flip off his back before dropping to my knees to retrieve the errant sandal. What the *fuck* is his problem? Was the guy who came to a birthday party just to apologize to me abducted by aliens?

I find my shoe and stomp the rest of the way to the truck, keeping my eyes on the ground to avoid breaking an ankle. Ryder would probably just leave me here.

The passenger door creaks open, and I view Ryder's truck as a whole lot less charming and a whole lot more as a piece of shit. The squealing sound of the door grates on my nerves as I climb back up on the vinyl seat and yank at the seatbelt. Nothing. The strip of fabric doesn't move. *Piece of shit.*

I give up on my attempt to employ any safety features for this trip, and instead reach out to close the door. Finally, one to slam. Enduring the nails-on-a-chalkboard sound again is almost worth it to hear the satisfying smack as the metal door meets the frame of the truck. I'm a little surprised it doesn't fall off.

Equally impressed Ryder doesn't yell at me. He does grit his teeth.

Guess I'm not the only one utilizing the stupid yet effective silent game.

We sit in silence as Ryder drives through downtown. All the shops and stores are still and silent. The massive clock outside the town hall tells me it's just past one in the morning. I'm even more curious about Ryder's plans. The most probable explanation is he's meeting another girl, but then why would he agree to go to the treehouse with me? He could have taken me straight home.

Ryder James is an endless mystery to me. I'm used to people doing exactly what I expect them to. He hardly ever does.

The truck loiters at the final stop sign before Fernwood turns residential.

"No idea where you live," Ryder states.

Call me childish, but I feel a flash of victory he spoke first. "Stay straight for two blocks, then turn left. Last house on the right."

Ryder follows my directions silently, and I try to see my neighborhood through his eyes. I'm not embarrassed of the large houses with sprawling lawns, but I do eye the lawn jockey the Scotts ordered from Italy and the vintage Land Rover the Taylors only drive once a year a little more critically than I ever have before. I imagine Ryder is judging a lot more than just those two extravagant purchases, but he doesn't say anything as he stops outside the last house on the right.

I'm still mad—hurt—but I also have manners. Unlike *some* people. I abandoned any attempts to act like Ryder doesn't affect me far too soon, but

there’s no time like the present to revitalize them. Especially while I’m trapped in a cab with the one person most important to convince: him.

“Thanks for the ride,” I say breezily. Nonchalantly. Easily. Like I break up with my boyfriend and get rides home from a guy who just rejected my advances all the damn time. At least, that’s the tone I’m striving for.

Nothing in response. We’re back to imitating elementary schoolers, clearly.

I stay put in my spot on the high road, literally biting my tongue to keep some of the things I’d like to say to him at bay. I pull the door handle, steeling myself for the horrible squeal. Except the door doesn’t budge. I keep grabbing it, using my left palm to push outward in a desperate attempt to utilize my limited arm strength to escape.

I huff and shove and fiddle.

Still stuck.

I better have some good karma coming my way to counteract the events of this evening. I exhale loudly and then inhale deeply, trying to pull in some patience with the oxygen.

Finally, I turn to Ryder. Like a true gentleman, he’s silently sitting and watching me struggle.

“The door won’t open.” I state the obvious.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have slammed it shut,” is his thoughtful response.

“Maybe you should get a newer truck,” I snap back. It’s a cheap shot, especially as we sit outside the multi-million-dollar house I call home. I’m sure this is all he could afford. I didn’t have to buy my own car.

Ryder doesn’t call me out on the insensitivity. He leans over, providing me a perfect view of the clenched muscles in his jaw. His forearm brushes mine, and goosebumps erupt on my bare skin. Thankfully, I’m pretty certain Ryder is too focused on jiggling the door handle to notice my reaction to his touch.

The scent of cedar and mint and clean laundry washes over me as he presses even closer to my side of the cab, and apparently anger is some sort of turn-on for me.

I’m far from happy with Ryder right now but having him this close has me just as aroused as when he was on top of me twenty minutes ago.

The door swings open, and the cringe-worthy creak that accompanies it is suddenly the sweetest sound it the world. A gust of night air washes away

Ryder’s scent as he moves back behind the wheel.

I leap out of the cab like someone just set the cheap fabric seat on fire.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIVE

I successfully avoid Ryder for the entirety of the following week. He doesn't make any attempt to talk to me, and I *certainly* don't instigate a conversation with him. The student body is far more interested in the events that transpired before I left with Ryder, but I field a few questions about him from my close friends.

Paige is the most persistent, but my insistence that all Ryder did was drop me off at home must be believable because she drops it eventually. She doesn't mention it, or anything else, as I climb into her car to travel to Cloven Pond.

It's the final weekend of September, but the weather feels like August is still upon us. Cloven Pond is the typical summer hang-out for those who don't have pools. Along with some who do.

The speakers are blasting as per usual, so Paige's only greeting is a grin as I settle in the passenger seat, waving at Kinsley and Kennedy, who are in the backseat. They both smile before resuming singing along with Katy Perry. Unfortunately, neither of them possesses her vocal talent. My ears are assaulted by a lot more than just volume.

It's a quick trip to the pond. It's located on the fringe of town, nestled within a short stretch of woods purchased by some nature preserves unwilling to let the land be used for development. Cars line the dirt road that leads toward the pond, the only indication of civilization amongst the mossy oaks.

Kinsley and Kennedy jump out eagerly and then start heading toward the path that leads to the pond. I linger behind with Paige, who's pulling a bag out of her trunk. I've never been a fan of the pond. If I were to lie out in

the grass, I'd much rather do it in my own backyard. Or alongside Paige's pool. Neither of those have the same social element, though. You travel to the pond to be seen, not because it's the spot most people want to be.

Paige closes her trunk, and I follow her along the path that winds toward the pond. I keep my eyes on the ground. Pitching forward in the field last weekend is fresh on my mind, and the ground here is equally untamed.

Although the decision ensures I stay upright, it also means I don't see him coming. I glance up when we reach the end of the path, and Ryder is right there, clearly waiting to head back up the trail. A guy with blond hair and a wide smile stands at his side.

Paige is closer to him, but Ryder's companion focuses all of his attention directly on me.

"Hey. I'm Tommy." He holds his right hand out with a smirk.

"Hi, I'm Elle." I give it a firm shake.

Tommy chuckles. "Huh. James was right. You are nice."

Instead of introducing Paige like I was planning to, I swing my testy gaze to an equally annoyed Ryder. "You told your friend I'm *nice*?"

"Nah, that wasn't what he said," Tommy tells me. "But I thought you'd think I was hitting on you if I shared what he actually said."

I'm no longer peeved; I'm intrigued. "What did you tell him?" I demand, shifting my attention back to Ryder.

No response. Guess he's still playing the silent game.

"He's pretending to be mad at you because he thinks you're mad at him," Tommy supplements.

"Tommy," Ryder finally grits out, sounding thoroughly irritated.

"I *am* mad at him," I inform Tommy.

Tommy nods once, like that makes perfect sense. "Right. Why?"

"Well, he—there was—uh. He was rude." I pause. "You sort of had to be there," I conclude lamely.

Ryder snorts. Tommy grins. Paige eyes us all with interest.

"It was *lovely* meeting you, Tommy," I inform him before pulling Paige past the two boys.

"Guess that explains why you wouldn't talk about him driving you home," Paige comments as we continue along the grass toward our group of friends. The group, I realize with annoyance, that includes Liam.

“There’s nothing to explain. He drove me home and was rude about it.” I sniff.

“Just admit you like him, Elle.”

“I definitely do not,” I reply. “Not anymore, at least,” I acquiesce.

“Uh-huh, sure. You might change your mind when you see him shirtless. Holy abs.”

I resist the urge to follow her gaze. I thought he was leaving, not stripping. “I’m not that superficial, Paige.”

“I don’t think you’re superficial, just in denial.”

“Can we just go sunbathe, please?”

We reach the group and drop our bags. Everyone greets us enthusiastically, even Liam. He seems intent to act like things are fine between us, and I really couldn’t care less as long as he’s clear there’s a hard line after friendship now. I should maybe be concerned I’m not the least bit bothered he cheated on me, but my reaction to Ryder’s rejection made it clear I’m completely capable of holding a good grudge.

I spread out a towel and slip on a pair of sunglasses. Lounging on my back, I rise up on my elbows and tilt my face toward the sunshine. Tall maples shade the edge of the water, casting skinny reflections on the pond’s surface. I stare at it, forcing my eyes to take in every detail. Clear water. Dapples of sunshine filtering through the trees. The occasional reed. Tire swing dangling on the far edge.

Finally, I give up. My gaze leaps to the left. Ryder’s not looking this way, thankfully. And Paige wasn’t lying. He’s shirtless now. Whatever he does at the garage must require some serious core strength, because his torso is more defined than the football players surrounding me. I spent my summer watching the team engage in some pretty strenuous workouts, so I have an idea of the amount of work gaining a physique like Ryder’s would require. His back is to me, and I’ve never considered that part of a male’s anatomy particularly sexy. I am now.

I tear my eyes away before Ryder or any of his companions spot me staring. I have no idea what he told his friend Tommy, but he obviously said something that piqued his interest about me.

I dig through my bag for my phone, just for something to do. Everyone else is discussing the football game last night and experiencing it one time was enough for me. Despite my suggestion, it doesn’t appear as though Liam heeded my advice and devoted any of his newfound freedom to

improving his throwing accuracy. We lost. Again. Cheering for a team is a lot more fun if you have something to cheer for.

I scroll through social media for a bit and then lose interest in that as well.

“I’m going in,” I say to no one in particular.

Everyone looks over at me in surprise. I’ve been coming to the pond since middle school, yet I’ve never entered the oversized puddle before. I prefer to swim in bodies of water with visible bottoms and filtered contents.

“Seriously?” Paige asks.

“Yup.” I stand and yank off the cotton cover-up I’m wearing. Liam’s blatantly staring at my body, and his words from the kitchen come back to me. *No girl, no matter how hot she is, is worth waiting that long for.* I don’t regret not sleeping with Liam. But it does make Ryder’s behavior all the more confusing. Was I *too* available? Why can’t he act like a normal teenage guy when it comes to sex? When it comes to anything?

I tiptoe to the edge of the water, through the higher grass that surrounds the immediate periphery. Under the shade of the maples, the water doesn’t look nearly as inviting. Especially since I can see some green spots I think are algae floating along the surface. I bite my bottom lip and then am distracted by a loud shout.

Ryder’s crew has migrated to the tire swing hanging from the largest maple.

Per-freaking-fect.

I take a tentative step forward. A bit of mud squelches between my toes, and I cringe.

Why did I think this was a good idea?

Oh, right.

Because I’m trying to distract myself from the fact that, superficial or not, I’m the teensy bit affected by the sight of Ryder James without his shirt on.

I’m also sick of doing exactly what is expected of me. Of pretending my sole desire in life is to be perfect. I’d say it’s a continuation of breaking things off with Liam, but that wouldn’t be completely honest.

It’s Ryder’s fault. Because he’s a constant reminder that doing what’s *not* expected is really fucking thrilling. Even when I’m annoyed with him. Maybe especially, too.

One more step forward, then another. Except, my foot keeps sinking on this step. The water's up to my knee before I realize I'm not about to hit the bottom.

"Water's six feet there, Elle!"

I glance across the pond to find the group around the tire swing is all looking at me. Except Ryder, who's looking at the ground. And Danielle, who's studying Ryder.

Tommy's the one who called out to me and is grinning now.

"Right, yeah," I call back. "Just testing the temperature out."

"Come use the swing. It's way better than jumping in the side."

Based on Tommy's wide, devilish grin, he's completely aware of the fact I would very much like not to take him up on his offer.

But I don't really have a choice now.

I broach the invisible boundary between our two groups, picking my way around the periphery of the pond until I halt a few feet away from the group that includes Ryder. He's with five others, including Tommy. Danielle and three guys I've seen before but certainly never spoken to.

No introductions are made. I'm not sure if it's a blatant attempt to make me feel more awkward, but it's a successful one. The only person I'd spoken to before today is Ryder, and I'm not exactly looking at him as an ally right about now.

"Why don't you go first?" Tommy pairs the suggestion with another shit-eating grin.

I give him a tight smile, but step forward. The sooner I swing into the scummy water, the sooner I can return to my friends. Which makes me wonder what they're all thinking about this. Probably debating whether I'm having an early quarter-life crisis if I had to guess.

Tommy's holding the tire away from the water, and I focus all my attention on it, so I don't have to acknowledge anyone or anything else. I take the rope from him and try to figure out how to mount the thing. I never paid close attention when the guys would do this before. Plus, they'd always try to outdo each other with some sort of ridiculous backflip or elaborate leap.

My only objective is getting away from Ryder as quickly as possible, even if it requires looking like an idiot.

I try to hook my left foot in the hollow tube three times with no success. I probably should have let Tommy keep holding the rope, because I'm

having to grip it to stay on shore, limiting my range of motion.

Finally, my left foot meets hard rubber, but now I'm stuck hobbling on one foot. Do I just push off from the shore and let one foot drag behind me? I'm worried my left foot is now *too* secure. I'll have a narrow window to pull it out, or else I'll end up back here right next to Ryder like an unwieldy boomerang.

"Looks like the princess doesn't jump off many tire swings," a female voice mutters, loud enough for me to hear.

By process of elimination, I reason it was Danielle. I feel my face flush. Her voice is mocking, but there's a healthy dose of vitriol beneath it I'm surprised to hear. Not only because people don't ordinarily talk to me that way, but because I've never so much as spoken to Danielle before. I had no idea she was harboring such strong resentment toward me.

"You know what? Why don't one of you guys go first?" I suggest, attempting to undo what little progress I've made.

A stick cracks behind me, suggesting someone's approach. I expect it to be Tommy, but the arm that reaches out to grasp the rope is one I recognize. Unfortunately, I'm only on that sort of first-sight basis with one set of forearms.

"Get your other foot on the tire, Elle."

I huff. "You're talking to me again?"

"I'm trying to make certain we don't spend all afternoon watching you attempt to do this."

"Then maybe your friend shouldn't have invited me over. And you shouldn't have told him whatever you did."

Green eyes blaze. "You could have said no."

"I'm not rude. Unlike *some* people."

"Just jump off the swing, Elle."

"I'm fucking *trying* to, Ryder."

There are some whispers behind us. I'm not sure whether they're about our bickering or the profanity.

But I'm totally distracted from his friends' gossiping when Ryder uses his free arm to scoop me up—directly under my ass, I might add—and lift me up so both of my feet are level with the bottom of the tire.

"Elle," he mutters, and I realize I'm not moving, just memorizing the way it feels to have his palm wrapped possessively around my thigh.

“Yeah, I’m good,” I tell him. I wrap both hands around the rope, just above where Ryder’s still holding it. The balls of both of my feet are perched on the very edge of the rubber. Ryder drops his arm, unfortunately.

“Make sure to let go of the rope,” Ryder instructs.

“I’m not an idiot, you know.”

“You did just try to enter a pond like it was a pool.”

I sigh. “You know you’re the one who needs to let go right now.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Ryder yanks the rope so I move closer to shore. He’s next to me now, so I catch the flash of a grin. “You know, pushing you into a body of water has always been a fantasy of mine.”

I’m wholly unprepared for his sense of humor to make an appearance. But I don’t let it show. “Too bad you had ‘someplace to be’ last weekend, or I would have shown you mine.”

Heat simmers in his eyes like a green flame before he lets the rope go.

It takes me approximately three seconds to swing out to the center of the pond. Two seconds in, I decide to do something I’ll possibly regret. Instead of simply letting go and dropping in the water, I do a backflip off the edge of the tire and into the water, cringing when my feet sink into the muddy bottom of the pond.

I fight back to the surface, emerging just in time to watch Tommy swing into the water beside me. With a smug stab of satisfaction, I note his dismount is nowhere near as impressive as mine was. It probably didn’t take him five minutes to get on the tire, though. I swim toward the edge of the pond, unwilling to wait and see what Tommy has to say about my quibbling with Ryder. Or who is entering the pond next.

Climbing out of the pond is not a graceful process. I’d equate it to exiting a pool without a ladder or a shallow end. Wet grass squelches between my toes as I head back toward familiarity.

“Nice flip, Elle,” Kinsley compliments as I near.

“Thanks,” I reply, flashing her a quick smile as I avoid all the other looks being cast my way.

No one else says anything—either complimentary or accusing—as I flop down on my towel when I reach my original spot. A rectangle of grass I really wish I’d just remained on.

Paige's gaze is burning into the side of my skull. I finally turn to meet her gaze. She raises both eyebrows.

“Yeah, fine. I like him,” I admit.

“No shit. You just went off the *tire swing*.”

“It wasn’t that bad. I tried it once. Now I’m good.”

“Unless Ryder lifts you up again.” Paige gives me a sly glance.

I feel heat flood my cheeks. “Maybe,” I acquiesce.

There’s no “maybe” about it, unfortunately. Despite my best attempts—and his—I care a whole lot about what Ryder thinks of me. He draws out a desire to be bolder. Freer. Jumping off a tire swing is one of the tamer things I’ve done in his presence. There’s no one else I can say that about. No one else who would have put me in that same situation.

Paige's snort suggests she’s aware that by “maybe” I really mean “yes.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIX

My parents aren’t the type to put on a show for others. They’re just as uptight and discerning during a typical Saturday breakfast as they are at an exclusive gala. Their poise is predictable. They’re not putting on an act for any of the four families we're hosting tonight.

I am.

Hosting a Sunday night family dinner for a few of Fernwood’s other top-tier residents is a tradition. It’s far outlasted my relationship with Liam, but it doesn’t feel that way. Tonight is the first time I’m attending the monthly dinner since he very publicly cheated on me, and I’m pretty sure the awkwardness at the “kids table” is not just in my imagination.

Neither my father nor my mother was happy to hear about my split with Liam. The Hathaways are some of my parents’ oldest friends. Liam’s father works with mine. Beyond those entanglements, Liam is exactly the type of guy they want me to end up with. But even my parents aren’t oblivious to the fact high school relationships rarely last long beyond graduation—if that. I didn’t tell them he cheated on me, but the yearning glances my mother is sending our way may require me to. Especially since she chose to seat us right next to each other.

Thankfully Paige and her parents are in attendance tonight as well. My best friend keeps the conversation lively and free from complete silence. I still grit my teeth when Liam’s arm brushes mine for the I’ve-lost-count-how-many-th time.

Salad plates are finally cleared for the first course, and I risk a glance at the grandfather clock that’s the centerpiece of the dining room. Not even

eight. Past dinners have lasted until ten. At least.

"Homecoming planning going all right?" Liam asks me.

"Yup." I keep my response short.

"You managed to get the country club?"

"Uh-huh." I didn't think Liam was actually paying attention when I'd tell him about student council complications. At the time, I was annoyed he wasn't. Now, I'm annoyed he was.

"Have you heard back from any schools?"

"Applications aren't even due yet, Liam." I point out.

"We could still end up at the same place…" he cajoles.

"Go to college wherever you'd like. Won't make a difference to me. We're *done*, Liam." I inject as much finality as one can into a whisper.

"I know I messed up, okay? The thing with Danielle was stupid. We lost again, and my dad—"

"I don't care, Liam. Honestly, we were over before you cheated."

"What do you mean?"

"Things hadn't been good between us for a while. We were never the type of couple that lasts."

"We were exactly that type of couple," Liam refutes. "We still can be."

"No, we can't."

"Why not?" he challenges.

"Because I don't want to be, okay?"

"This about trailer trash?"

I look over at him for the first time, shocked he's bringing up Ryder. "What? No."

Liam scoffs. "Like I didn't see you two together at the pond."

"He helped me get on a tire swing. I don't see what that has to do with our break-up."

"He lives in a *trailer*, Elle."

"I know where he lives," I snap. "Maybe I'm not as shallow as you think."

Surprise and horror mingle in his expression. "Wait. You're not actually…"

"Elle? Could I get your help in the kitchen for a minute, please?"

I'm not sure what my mother could possibly need help with, especially considering the fact she's had no involvement in any aspect of preparing this dinner beyond picking the menu and paying the catering staff, but I

don’t say that. I seize the chance to put some distance between me and Liam.

“Sure.” I stand and follow my mother into the kitchen.

She whirls on me as soon as we’re out of sight from the dining room. “What on earth is going on between you and Liam at the table? It looked like you were arguing. I thought you said you two are still friends.”

“We were,” I stress. “He won’t stop badgering me about getting back together.”

Delight replaces dismay. “Liam wants to get back together?”

“Yes,” I confirm.

“Eleanor, you should…”

“We are *not* getting back together,” I state emphatically. “He cheated on me, Mom.”

There’s a flash of understanding, but it edges away into acceptance. “People make mistakes, Eleanor. It’s a fact of life.”

I’m horrified by her blasé response. “Not all mistakes should be forgiven.”

“Liam’s a good person, Elle. Sometimes things just happen…”

“Not sure how one just happens to end up in bed with another girl,” I retort. My mother is normally a moral epicenter. Her resignation regarding this topic makes me wonder about things I’ve never considered before, and never wanted to. Like whether she’s speaking from personal experience. “And what are you basing the fact he’s a good person on? His family’s net worth?”

“Eleanor! That’s quite enough. The Hathaways are some of our closest friends.”

“Because they’re rich, right?”

“I know you’re upset, but that’s absolutely no excuse for this sort of behavior. You haven’t acted like this since you were a child.”

If my mother’s hoping that reminder will correct my behavior, she’s dead wrong. “Then it’s about time I have a relapse, don’t you think?”

“Eleanor Josephine Clarke! I don’t know what…”

For the first time ever, I walk out of the room while my mother is still speaking, ducking through the doorway that leads to the front foyer.

She follows. “Eleanor!” my mother hisses. “We have guests… we’re eating… what are you doing?” She’s discombobulated. Disbelieving. This isn’t how Eleanor Clarke is supposed to act.

Right now, I don't care. I need to get out of this house. Away from the stifling weight of predictability.

"I'm going out." I grab my keys from the glass bowl on the entryway table. "Tell everyone I'm sick. Burned myself baking dessert. Whatever you want."

I head out the front door before she can say another word. Not that she seemed capable of it. Pretty sure I just shocked my mother into silence. I can't seem to care.

Betty is boxed in between two cars, but I manage to maneuver out between them. Then, I'm faced with the dilemma of how to spend my newfound freedom. This was the furthest thing from a planned outing. I just start driving. I take a left. Two rights. Get on the highway. Get off. The lack of direction is gratifying. It's also terrifying. I'm a planner. I follow a schedule. Always know what I'm supposed to do and when to do it. Aimlessly driving around doesn't fit with any of that.

I'm halfway to Boston—to do what, I don't know—when I turn off the highway and head back toward Fernwood. I take the back roads, entering the town limits on the opposite edge of town where I live.

A tired, rusty sign hangs just off the paved street, and I pull over impulsively, parking right beneath the sign reading *Bob's Garage*. I climb out of my car just as a middle-aged man appears from behind one of the piles of car scraps I'm surrounded by. I squint to try and see his features in the light cast by the massive building I'm assuming is the garage. I've never seen him before.

"Can I help you, miss? Car trouble?" he asks me, in a gruff, weathered tone.

"No, the car's fine. I'm here to see Ryder James. Is he here?" I reply.

The man studies me for a minute, shoving the brim of his ratty ball cap upward so he can rub his forehead with a grease-smeared hand. Light blue eyes flick over me, the car to my left, the empty road to my right.

"Bay six," he finally says. "Last one."

"Thank you," I reply earnestly, moving past him and walking toward the garage. One end of the structure looks like a storefront, with glass windows and a door that reads *OFFICE*. The rest of the building is separated by massive metal sliding doors, each with a number painted on it stretching upward several feet.

By process of elimination, I quickly surmise three and six are the two doors open at the moment. Errant stones scatter as I stride across the pavement. I peek inside three as I pass it. The glaring lights are an assault to my eyes after the dark evening. There's a shiny silver car raised on some sort of structure, but no person in sight.

I keep walking.

Four, five, *six*.

I slow my steps when I reach the open garage door, then stop entirely when I spot Ryder. I lean against the edge of the opening, surveying him. He's bending over the front end of the car, tinkering with something beneath the open hood. Wearing a white undershirt that doesn't do anything to hide the movement of his muscles as they shift and tense while he works.

This section is just as well-lit as bay three was, and I look away from Ryder to peer at shelves holding a wide array of items. Orange plastic bottles, metal spray cans, stained rags, disposable gloves, clear containers, drills, and a lot of twisted metal I'd guess are car parts but can't even attempt to name. A radio croons in the background, spilling out lyrics to a leisurely country song that seems out of place under harsh artificial lights.

Ryder turns to grab a wrench off the tray parked beside him, and my stealthy perusal is over.

Wary, surprised eyes meet mine. "What are you doing here, Elle?"

I shrug. "No idea," I reply honestly.

He studies me. "I'm working."

"I won't bother you." I take a few steps forward. Tentative ones, under Ryder's watchful gaze. He doesn't seem mad I'm here, but he's definitely not happy about it. I make a show of glancing around the space I already scanned. "This is… cool."

He huffs out a laugh.

"I mean it. I don't know anything about cars."

"I know. You drive a convertible."

"What does that mean?" I cross my arms.

"We don't live in the south. Or California."

"Well aware." I take a seat in the swivel chair to his right, making myself comfortable.

Ryder's eyes narrow. "What are you doing?"

"Sitting." I give him a saccharine smile.

"Is there something wrong with your *convertible*? Did you crash it?"

“I didn’t crash my convertible.” I roll my eyes. “My impractical car works perfectly fine, thank you very much. That’s not the reason why I’m here.”

“That’s usually the only reason people visit the mechanic,” he replies.

I don’t say anything, just start fiddling with the radio until I come across “Brown-Eyed Girl.”

“This song makes me wish I had brown eyes,” I inform Ryder.

His lips quirk. “Yours are fine.”

“Gee, thanks.” I roll my eyes. “You used to be less stingy with compliments.”

He eyes me, visibly cautious about my reference to our shared past. “I used to be a lot of things.”

“Like…” I prompt.

“Stupid things.”

“And I fall into that category?”

Ryder breaks my gaze, rattling some wrenches together and then turning to work on the car again. “You should go.”

“I walked out of my parents’ dinner party. Not exactly eager to head back home.”

“How come?”

“Uh—they’ll be pissed?”

There’s a flash of a grin. “No—why did you walk out?”

“My mom was telling me to get back together with Liam.”

“Hmmm,” Ryder hums. But for some reason I get the feeling he’s not as indifferent as he sounds.

“I’m not going to,” I say unnecessarily.

The only response is clinking metal as he continues to work on the car. “Hiding out isn’t very mature,” he finally replies.

“Neither is fantasizing about pushing someone into a body of water,” I retort.

Ryder grunts. “No one except for employees are supposed to be in the garage.”

“Do you want me to beg for you to let me stay, or something? Because I will.”

“Why did you come *here*, Elle?”

“You mentioned a garage to your brother. I figured it had to be this place.”

“You came here because you thought I would be.”

It’s a statement, not a question. I answer it anyway. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to see you.”

“Why?” he repeats, giving up any pretense of working on the car. Guess I lied when I said I wouldn’t bother him. He returns the wrench to the tray and wipes his hands with a rag as he studies me, waiting for a response.

“It’s been weird ever since you came back. I’m different. You’re different. But *we* don’t feel different. I feel like it hasn’t been two years since the last time I saw you. Like I should still be meeting you at the treehouse after school or smiling at you in the halls. So… I left my parents’ party, drove around for a while, and then ended up here. Because I wanted to see you.”

Ryder’s silent as he drops the rag back on the tray. Mad? Annoyed? Surprised? All of the above, probably.

The song changes. Opening strains of Sixpence None the Richer’s “Kiss Me” float between us. I’ve heard this song dozens of times before, yet I suddenly know every time I hear it for the rest of my life I’ll think of this exact moment.

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Elle.”

“You could listen to the song,” I suggest.

That gets his attention. Green eyes snap to mine. A glimmer of humor twitches on his lips. Then, shockingly, he straightens. Approaches me.

I freeze. It was a joke. A deflection from my honesty. *Not* an opportunity I expected him to take advantage of.

But he does. He hauls me to my feet and presses me against a red metal chest of drawers. And kisses me.

Desperately.

Urgently.

His eagerness makes me feel less like a girl chasing the boy she can’t have. Less like a girl chasing the boy who doesn’t want her.

The memory of our kiss in the treehouse was tarnished by the events that followed, but it didn’t affect my recollection of what it feels like to kiss Ryder James. I’m expecting it all this time: the heat, the excitement, the sensation of being aware of everything and nothing all at once.

“Hey, Ry, we’re headed—”

Ryder pulls back abruptly, but not before his friend Tommy gets an eyeful of what we were just doing, if his raised eyebrows are any indication.

“Oh. Hello again, Elle,” Tommy says, as a smile starts to unfurl across his face.

I risk a glance at Ryder. Impressively impassive.

“Hi, Tommy.”

“Mike and I are headed to Danielle’s,” Tommy tells Ryder. “You staying here?”

There’s a pause. A long one. I look over at Ryder, and he’s already looking at me.

“Yeah,” he replies finally. “I’m staying here.”

“Oh-kay. Sorry for interrupting.” Tommy winks, then disappears.

The radio’s changed again, now playing Oasis’s “Wonderwall.” Ryder flicks it off, then shuts the hood of the car he was working on.

“Let’s go.”

“Thought you just told Tommy you were staying?”

“He was my ride.”

“Does that mean you’re willing to be seen in a convertible?”

Ryder scoffs. “Not planning on anyone seeing anything.”

He starts toward the door, and I follow, watching as he flicks off all the lights and then hits a button that causes the heavy metal door to slide down into place with a *clang*. I stare at the number six for a moment before realizing Ryder has already started walking. I follow him on the same route I traversed solo earlier. All the doors are closed now, the office dark and silent.

“Do you normally work this late?” I ask.

“If there’s work to be done,” Ryder replies, heading straight toward my car. It stands out like a shiny red apple in a sea of rusty scrap metal. He veers for the driver’s side, and I raise both eyebrows.

“You’ve insulted my car multiple times, yet you think I’m going to let you drive it?”

“Yup.”

“Well, I’m not,” I inform him.

“Wanna bet?” He grins, and my heart sets off at a gallop.

“Bet what?” I manage.

“You tell me.”

“I bet you won’t tell me what you said to Tommy about me.”

“You’re perfectly imperfect.”

“What?”

“That’s what I told Tommy. Keys.”

His tone is brusque. Business-like. Matter of fact. It catches me off guard. I expected him to waver or hedge around a half-assed response.

I pull my car keys out of my pocket and toss them to Ryder. He settles in the driver’s seat, and I climb into the passenger side of my convertible for the first time.

Perfectly imperfect. I wish I hadn’t asked him. Wish I’d kept wondering if he said I was hot or exasperating. Or that Tommy was teasing, and he really had simply said nice. Anything but those two words worming their way inside me with a warmth similar to that of a candle cocooned from the wind. Everyone else in Fernwood thinks I’m perfect. Ryder thinks I’m imperfectly so. I know which perception I prefer.

Ryder turns the car back onto the road, and I steal glimpses of him out of the corner of my eye as he drives along, timing the glances to correlate with the streetlights we pass that illuminate his features. None of the confusion I’m grappling with is evident on his face.

Is he clear on where we stand? Or does he just not care?

He takes the turn that leads to the trailer park, and I swallow a sigh. I was hoping he’d drive to the field.

The trailer park doesn’t look quite as wretched this trip. Nightfall blankets the rougher edges. The darkness hides overgrown yards and missing stairs. Lit windows are all that shine through the absolute black that cloaks everything else, appearing more cozy than crestfallen.

Ryder parks my car next to his truck and turns off the ignition.

“Can I come in?” I blurt, before he has the chance to say anything.

There’s a pause. There aren’t any lights on in his trailer, so I can’t see the barest hint of his face. Then, “Sure.”

I unbuckle my seatbelt and open my door, unwilling to give him a chance to change his mind. Ryder does the same, and I follow him up to the front door. He unlocks it and flicks on a lamp, illuminating a small, compact kitchen. Used dishes litter the counter. An open box of cereal sits on the table nestled in the corner. Floral wallpaper decorates the walls. The trailer is empty. Silent. Barely visible in the light cast by the solitary lamp.

“No one’s home?” I ask.

“Nope. My room’s down here.” Ryder starts down the short hallway, turning on more lights as he goes, and I follow him. His entire room is smaller than my bathroom. The cramped space is barely large enough for the twin bed, chest of drawers, and wooden desk that fills the space. The walls are bare, painted a shade of off-white that’s begun to veer toward yellow in spots.

I study the stack of books on his desk, run my fingers along the top of his drawers, and then climb onto his bed. Springs creak in protest. I tuck my feet under my thighs, sitting cross-legged.

Ryder leans against the dresser, studying me. I lay down slowly on the navy comforter, holding his gaze the whole time. My hair spills off the raised bump of the pillow in a waterfall of brunette strands.

He just keeps looking at me. I bite my bottom lip, staring back.

Electricity snaps and crackles in the tiny space.

“This isn’t what I had in mind.”

I scoff. “Well aware.” Ryder’s been consistent in his lack of interest in continuing our physical relationship. I’d think he was totally indifferent, if not for his lapse in the garage earlier.

“I only said you could come in because I was worried you’d beg to.”

“Oh, really?” I shift on the bed, well aware the movement is pulling the material of my dress higher. “So, you don’t want me to beg anymore? For anything?”

“Elle…”

“What, Ryder? We’ve had sex before.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“So… you’re good? Had your fill freshman year?”

Ryder huffs out a laugh. “Elle. Be serious.”

“I *am*, Ryder.”

He shoves away from the drawers, advancing on me. I sit up, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. When he nears the bed, which only takes a couple steps, I wind them around him, pulling him closer to me.

“We’re a bad idea, Elle,” he tells me. But he doesn’t resist my hold.

“Why?” I slip my hands under the hem of his shirt, marveling over the hot, firm skin that meets my touch. I skim one finger across the indentations of his stomach, and Ryder sucks in a sharp breath.

“Because if we do this…” I yank on his shorts, and he swears. “I’m not going to be your fucking rebound, Elle.”

I freeze. “What?”

“You heard me. You just broke up with Hathaway.”

“Liam doesn’t have *anything* to do with this.”

Ryder scoffs.

“I mean it. I want you. You, Ryder. I wanted you freshman year. I want you now.”

“For sex?”

“For anything. Everything.” He’s looking at me, so I see the flash of uncertainty cross his handsome features.

“Aren’t you going to Homecoming with Robert Newsome?”

“What? Where did you hear that?”

“Where do you think? The whole school has nothing better to do except gossip about you, apparently.” There’s a bite to the words. Rumors about me bother him. Seeing as he consistently ignores me at school, I’m surprised.

“Well, I told him no.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s not the guy I want to go with.” I don’t spell it out, but I don’t need to. Ryder James may be a lot of things, but he’s far from an idiot. He may be the most perceptive person I’ve ever met, actually.

Ryder leans forward, forcing me to fall back on the bed again. “We’re a bad idea,” he repeats.

“Why?” I challenge.

“You’re going to end up with a guy nothing like me.”

“If you never ask me out? Yeah, probably.”

“Elle…” I arch my neck up and kiss him. He slips his tongue in my mouth, and it emboldens me. I let my hands drift upwards, pulling the cotton material of his t-shirt along. “Elle,” he says again, but this time it’s desperate. Yearning.

I let my hands drop. “I need you to want this, too.”

Ryder huffs. “You think I don’t want this?” His hands slide up, and then I’m no longer wearing a dress.

“I don’t know what you want,” I reply honestly.

His hand slides under my back, and then my bra disappears. “Then you haven’t been paying very close attention,” Ryder tells me.

“You haven’t been particularly clear,” I retort. He sends more mixed signals than a malfunctioning stoplight.

“This clear enough for you?” He kisses me. Heat and hunger race through me as I grasp his thick brown locks in an attempt to bind us together. I’m so overwhelmed I don’t even care he got the last word in. I pull his shirt up and over, using my feet to push his shorts down simultaneously. I used to do the same thing in the treehouse, and based on the way Ryder’s eyes flare, he remembers.

“Elle.” He groans my name as he pulls my underwear down. I bite his bottom lip in response. Hard.

He pulls back. “You’re sure?”

I nod. “Yes.”

He leans over the side of the bed and procures a familiar foil packet. I hold his gaze as he sheaths himself with a condom.

And… this is the moment when a hive of nerves decides to start buzzing around me.

Ryder’s looking at me, and I can tell he sees it.

“I’m nervous,” I whisper. “How stupid is that?”

“Not stupid. Elle, we don’t have to—”

“I’m not nervous because I don’t want to,” I tell him.

He rolls so he’s above me. “I thought about this when I was gone. How much I wanted to do this with you again.”

“You did?” I breathe. It’s the first time he’s acknowledged I so much as crossed his mind during his time in Florida. I grasp onto the tidbit like a beggar. Despite the position we’re in, that admission is what gives me some reassurance I might actually mean something to him.

“Yeah, I did,” Ryder replies.

The head of his cock hits my opening, and I inhale sharply. He starts to ease inside me, and I arch my back. We were kids fumbling around before. The purposeful way Ryder is sliding inside me feels very adult. Super intimate. He’s studying me closely, and there’s no doubt who I’m doing this with. Who’s inside me right now.

A few more strokes, and I wrap my legs around his waist. Green eyes bear into mine, and I’m *having sex with Ryder James*.

“I thought about this while you were gone, too,” I admit to him.

His movements quicken, sending heat skittering through me with each thrust. It’s both familiar and fresh. We’ve done this before, and it feels like we have. It also feels new, though. Novel. I had a crush on Ryder before. I

looked forward to our treehouse meet-ups. I relished the thrill of having such a delicious, forbidden secret.

But it never felt this overwhelming before. So consuming. I never craved his presence the way I do now. I also kept our association entirely separate from the rest of my life. I no longer feel any desire to do so.

The warmth builds to a breaking point, and I experience a powerful flash of euphoria. That's also new.

Ryder catches the surprise and pleasure on my face.

"Yeah, I've learned a few things," he tells me. Teasingly.

"Good for you." I don't match his tone. My words are dry. Annoyed.

I assumed Ryder slept with other people during his two-year absence, but I didn't need—want—confirmation of that fact. Especially since I didn't, and thanks to Liam's big mouth and my pool-side slip, I'm pretty sure Ryder already knows that.

Thanks to my perpetual inability to filter my thoughts around him, he now also knows his admission bothers me. I watch regret replace the roguish grin he paired his words with.

"El—"

"It's fine," I snap, making it worse.

I wiggle away so we're no longer touching but remain on the bed. Even annoyed and hurt, I'm not yet ready to leave his presence.

Ryder lies down beside me, letting a couple inches of comforter separate our bodies. I stare up at his ceiling, following the cracks that crisscross the ceiling. We're both silent. I don't know what to say. Apparently, Ryder doesn't either. He must not have mentioned prior hook-ups during any of his other more recent ones. Or if he did, *they* didn't react like possessive girlfriends.

"Do you want to go to Homecoming with me?"

I'm taken aback by the question, but I respond differently than I would under any other circumstances.

"Are you going to talk about your past hook-ups during it?"

I give up on staring at the ceiling, and glance over at him. He's fighting a grin that disappears when he sees I'm looking at him. "No. That wasn't what—I just meant…" He gives up on an explanation. "No," he reaffirms. "I'm not going to."

"Okay. Then, yes, I'll go to Homecoming with you."

"Okay," he confirms.

There’s a crash down the hall, and Ryder sits up, pulling on his shorts and shirt. “Stay here,” he tells me, sliding off the bed and heading toward the door.

I pull my dress back on and creep after him.

Voices sound from the kitchen. I reach the end of the hallway but remain in the shadowed doorway. Ryder’s mother is sprawled against the kitchen counter. It seems to be all that’s holding her upright. She’s wearing an outfit similar to the one I saw her in last time, except this time her tank top is ripped, one strap flopping around as she struggles to stay upright. There’s a black mark on her right arm that bears the tell-tale pattern of fingerprints. And she’s clearly under the influence of something, swaying as she grips the laminated material.

“Are you fucking kidding me, Mom?” Ryder asks angrily. “Who was it this time?”

Ryder’s mother makes an unintelligible sound, and he heaves out an exasperated, enervated sigh. He slings her left arm over his shoulder and turns toward the hallway before I have a chance to slink back into the shadows. He doesn’t look surprised to see me, just resigned.

“Go home, Elle.” The words aren’t unkind, but they’re final.

I nod once, heading out the door conveniently situated to my left and down the stairs to the stretch of dirt peppered with clumps of grass. I make it to my car, and then stall. I don’t want to leave yet. Don’t want to depart from Ryder. Don’t want to arrive at home.

So, I take a seat on the hood of my convertible, propping my feet atop the front fender and resting my chin in my cupped hands. I know enough about Ryder to be certain he’s not the type of person who appreciates pity, but I’m swamped with sympathy. With the realization his home life is a lot more complicated than I realized. Than he shared.

“You’re back.”

I glance to the right, and Ryder’s younger brother is standing there.

“Uh—yeah,” I reply awkwardly. Since I’m currently sitting outside of his trailer like a stalker. “I was, um, hanging out—talking with Ryder, and your mother, uh, came home. So Ryder thought—uh, thought I should head out.” Possibly the most inarticulate sentence I’ve ever uttered, but I’m incredibly uncomfortable. Not only do I not want this kid to realize I just had sex with his older brother, I’m entirely unsure on how to broach the topic of his mother’s current state.

“Oh.” Something in that word tells me Ryder’s little brother has surmised the latter truth already. I glance over at him, and he’s wearing a tired, forlorn expression that looks out of place on his young face.

“I’m Elle, by the way.”

“Christopher.” The joking, mischievous persona from our last encounter is entirely absent. “I should head in. Help Ryder.”

“Right. Yeah. Okay,” I reply quickly.

Christopher starts trudging toward the door, then spins back around. There’s a glimmer of mirth in his expression now. “He really likes you.”

Perfectly imperfect.

“How do you know?”

He shrugs with the indifference of a middle schooler, reminding me he’s probably not the ideal demographic to be looking to for romantic advice. “Just do.”

“I really like him,” I admit.

“Well, duh.” Christopher laughs. “You’re sitting out here.”

“Right.” Nothing like getting dressed down by a preteen.

“See ya.” He heads for the door again and doesn’t turn around this time.

“See ya,” I repeat, watching as he disappears inside.

Still, I stay in place on the hood of my car, staring into nothingness. Until I’m startled for a second time.

“Elle Clarke. Surprised you know this place exists.”

I look over my shoulder to see Ryder’s friend Tommy approaching me, hands in his pockets.

“There’s no one in town who doesn’t know this place exists. Most of them just haven’t been here,” I reply.

He stops next to me. “But you are.”

“Observant,” I compliment.

Tommy chuckles. “Arriving?”

“Leaving. Ryder’s mom came home.”

“Ah,” Tommy’s expression sobers.

“Is she like that… often?” I try to ask tactfully.

“Ry doesn’t talk about it much. Surprised he even brought you over if he knew she was out.”

“I sort of forced him to,” I admit.

Tommy grins, his good humor restored. “Ryder doesn’t do shit he doesn’t want to do. Not for girls, at least.”

We're both distracted by the trailer front door opening and closing. Ryder appears. He doesn't look surprised to see me. Christopher must have mentioned I'm out here. He seems more taken aback to see Tommy next to me.

"Hey, man," Tommy calls out.

"Hey," Ryder replies, not looking at me. "What's up?"

"Danielle's was lame without you," Tommy replies. "Thought I'd see how your night went. Didn't realize it would still be underway."

He smirks, and Ryder's glance slides to me, then back to Tommy.

"Could you check on Chris?" he requests. "I'll be right in."

"Yeah, sure," Tommy nods. "Later, Elle."

"Bye, Tommy," I reply.

Ryder doesn't speak until Tommy's inside the trailer. "You're still here."

"Yup." I slide off the hood of my car so I'm standing in front of him. "Is your mom okay?"

"She'll be fine," he replies.

"That happens… a lot?"

"She started using after my dad went to prison. Every few months she'll sober up for a bit, but otherwise… yes."

"Is there anything I can—"

"No." His tone is short, then softens. "No. There's nothing."

"Okay. I guess I'll go, then."

I start to turn, but he stops me, tugging me back using the hem of my dress.

His face is barely visible in the glow from the trailer's lights, but I can see the indecision inscribed in the features. "Elle. We're a bad idea because of me. Not you. Okay?"

"I don't think we're a bad idea," I tell him, and his jaw tenses. "I think we're an idea you should give a chance."

Then, I stand on my tiptoes and kiss him. Softly. Gently. It's a stark contrast to our desperate motions earlier. It's a common peck. Expected. The type of kiss you give someone you know you'll kiss again.

Ryder kisses me back, and I experience a surge of satisfaction. I pull back before he can.

"I've got to go. My parents are probably…" I let my voice trail off. I don't think even incensed would quite cover the vexation waiting for me at home. Leaving our monthly dinner party in the midst of it is bound to cause

a stir. My parents don’t deal well with stirring. They don’t perpetuate gossip, and they most certainly don’t appreciate being the topic of it.

I step away from him, and head for the driver’s seat. I open the door.

“I’ll see you at school?”

“Yeah.” He finally speaks. “You will.”

I’m tempted to ask if he’ll still be ignoring me, but I don’t. Ryder and I are tenuous. But more than that, I’m sick of being the one to instigate and encourage. I want Ryder to be clear. To care. But I can’t make him do either of those things. He has to decide them for himself.

I nod once before I climb inside my convertible. The engine roars to life, headlights bathing the shadowed scene I’ve been studying ever since I left the trailer in brilliant light. Ryder hasn’t moved. He watches me as I reverse. I hold his gaze for a moment before I start driving down the road, heading back for the part of town where I’m supposed to belong.

Wondering why it feels like that part is now behind me.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVEN

I leave the house even earlier than usual the following morning. As expected, my parents were apoplectic with anger about my abrupt departure last night. Disbelieving. Stunned. Almost comically so. They don't know what to do with a misbehaving child. Sarah's bout of rebellion ended in her death.

I blamed my uncharacteristic behavior on a broken heart. Told them it was too difficult being around Liam, so I drove to a coffee shop and read for a while.

If they're having trouble wrapping their heads around me leaving, I have no idea how they might respond to knowing where I actually spent the evening. Who I was with. What we were doing.

And that's the main reason I'm departing for school ahead of schedule. I'm not eager to spend more time with my parents' disapproving expressions. But I could if I had to.

I'm leaving early because I want to see him.

My phone vibrates in the cupholder as I wind through the streets of Fernwood. I fed Paige the same story about my disappearance last night as I told my parents. Unlike them, I think she might have an inkling of where I really went. Who I was with, at least.

I stop at Brewed Awakenings for a caffeine jolt. The coffee shop is bustling, filled with patrons eager for a beverage to accompany them on the commute into the city. I have to wait in line for a good ten minutes before I'm greeted by Joe's wrinkled face. It transforms into a genuine smile when he sees me.

"Elle! Good to see you, darlin'."

“You, too, Joe,” I respond. “Busy day, huh?”

“Probably a sign I ought to retire.”

“Fernwood wouldn’t be same without you, Joe.”

“Sweet of you to say. The usual?”

“Yes, please.” I pull out the card to pay, but he waves it away.

“On the house today.”

“Joe…”

He pushes my card away. “On the house.”

“Fine.” I shove a few bills into the tip jar before moving out of the way for the next customer. “Thank you.”

Joe smiles.

Twenty minutes later, I’m standing in the Fernwood High parking lot, talking to Kinsley and Kennedy. Neither of them were present for dinner last night, so I don’t have to dodge any questions or curious glances about it. That happens when Paige parks in her usual spot beside me. The looks, at least. She doesn’t say anything out of the ordinary as she joins our conversation. I can feel her probing eyes on me, though.

“I’ve got to drop some Homecoming forms off in the front office,” I announce. “I’ll see you guys in homeroom.”

I head inside the high school, waving and smiling back at everyone who greets me. Liam is leaning against his locker, and he gives me a curious look as I pass, no doubt just as baffled by my disappearance last night as Paige is.

Principal Watkins isn’t in her office, so it ends up being a quick stop. I just hand the forms from the country club confirming the location of the dance next week to the secretary, and then head for my locker.

I’m struggling to open the metal door—again—when he appears.

“Forget your combination?”

I stare at Ryder. Showing up at school is one thing. Talking to me here is another. It hasn’t occurred since our conversation on the football field the second day of school. Even more surprising? He’s the one instigating it.

“No,” I finally answer. “It’s just always stuck.” He watches silently as I keep struggling. “Thanks for the help,” I mutter.

He smirks. “You didn’t beg.”

I roll my eyes as I bang the metal. “Still bringing that up, huh?”

“Yup,” he pops the P obnoxiously.

“Please.” I hold his gaze, and the same electricity from last night makes a reappearance, crackling between us like lightening in a bottle.

He sighs but doesn’t actually appear put out as he moves closer to me. I don’t shift away as he fiddles with the door. A few rattles, and it acquiesces. Guess inanimate objects aren’t immune to capitulating to Ryder James, either.

I grab my books and slam the door shut again. I start walking, and Ryder surprises me by keeping pace with me.

“So, what’s your stance on PDA?” he asks me casually as we continue side by side down the hall.

“What?” People are calling out greetings to me, but I’m focused on nothing but Ryder.

“PDA? Public displays of affection? Are you for, against, indifferent?”

“Um,” I stall. “I guess it depends on the person?”

Ryder laughs. “Who do you think I’m talking about?”

“I didn’t want to be presumptuous,” I defend. “You’re asking permission to kiss me?”

“Whoa, now who’s being presumptuous? I was talking about holding hands. At most.”

I snort. “Sure.”

“So?”

“I—”

“Elle! You won’t believe…” Kinsley bounces over to my side, only pausing when she realizes who I’m talking to.

“I’ll see you later,” Ryder tells me quietly, then continues down the hallway.

“Ryder James?” Kinsley raises both eyebrows as we both watch him saunter out of sight.

“What won’t I believe?” I deflect.

“Aimee and Jack broke up!”

“I didn’t even know they were dating,” I inform her.

Kinsley rolls her eyes. “Well, they were. Paige said she told you.”

“It’s impossible to keep track of half of what Paige tells me.”

“Okay, that’s fair,” Kinsley replies with a laugh. She’s distracted when Kennedy comes up and starts gossiping about the same subject. I tune them out as they follow me to homeroom. Keeping up with Ryder’s moods and emotions feels like a full-time job, but the tenor of our latest conversation

has left me with the impression we're good. Great, even. It puts a legitimate pep in my step.

Paige eyes me curiously when I enter homeroom, but still doesn't ask any questions as Kennedy and Kinsley steer the conversation along. Excitement pings around my stomach as the bell indicating the end of homeroom rings. The anticipation thrumming through me reminds me of the first day of senior year. Things between Ryder and me feel more complicated than ever. But also simpler at the same time. I like him. I think he likes me?

Ryder arrives in History a few minutes after I do. He doesn't say anything, but he does give me a small, secret smile that trickles some heat into my blood that the air conditioning doesn't have a chance of combating.

I take careful notes throughout Mr. Anderson's lecture, but I'm not registering a word of what he's saying. I have to scan the lines of handwriting twice to realize we're discussing Stalin and Mussolini. When the bell rings, I'm one of the first packing up. I glance toward the back of the classroom, looking for Ryder. I'm stunned to see he's chatting easily with Jeff Jenkins, one of the football players in our gym class.

"Elle! You coming?" Kennedy calls, already half-way to the door.

"Yup." I pull on my backpack and follow her over to the exit.

None of my conversations with Ryder have involved a discussion of his class schedule, but I've never seen him in the halls between History and lunch, and today is no exception. He's already seated at his usual table, next to Danielle and across from Tommy, when I enter the cafeteria.

I lead the horde of cheerleaders I'm currently surrounded by over to our usual spot near the back of the room that overlooks the sun-dappled courtyard.

"Hey, Elle." Jack Rodgers drops down beside me seconds after I've taken a seat next to Paige.

"Hi, Jack," I respond, pulling my sandwich out of my lunchbox.

"Aimee and I broke up."

"Uh, yeah—I heard. Sorry."

He shrugs as he twists the cap off his bottled water. "No big deal. It was casual."

"Okay…" I'm not sure what else to say to that. Jack and I are friendly, but we've certainly never commiserated over his single status before.

"It's Homecoming next week."

“Yeah, I know,” I respond with a wry grin. “I’m planning it.”

Jack chuckles. “Oh yeah, right. Well, I was thinking since we’re both single, maybe we should go together?”

I should have seen it coming, but I didn’t. Jack’s on the football team with Liam. I didn’t think he’d ever ask me out. I glance down the table at my ex-boyfriend, only to find that he’s already watching me. So is the rest of our lunch table, clearly eavesdropping on my current conversation.

“Oh. I actually have a date to Homecoming already, Jack. Sorry.”

Jack shrugs as though he’s indifferent, but I don’t think he is. He knew asking me here and now would result in all of our close friends listening in. I don’t think he would have done so if he had any inkling I might turn him down the way I have every other guy I have who’s asked me. Except for Ryder.

Kennedy’s the one who asks the question I know everyone else at the table is thinking. Unfortunately, I have a feeling she may give Liam a run for his money in reacting to the answer poorly.

“Who are you going with, Elle?”

“Ryder James.” I take a bite of my sandwich.

Paige is the only one at the table who doesn’t look shocked by the revelation, confirming my suspicions about her suspicions. Ire flashes across Kennedy’s face, but she doesn’t say anything.

“Are you kidding me with this?” Liam asks from the opposite end of the table. Jack shifts awkwardly next to me.

I chew and swallow. “Nope. Completely serious.”

“Why would you go to Homecoming with *him*?”

“Because he asked. And because I want to.”

Liam scoffs disbelieving, but he doesn’t say anything else. Slowly, other conversations pick up around the table, dimming the spotlight on me.

Kennedy makes a point to stride away from the table as soon as lunch ends. Kinsley and Paige remain on either side of me.

“Do you think she’s actually mad?” I ask them.

“Who cares? When and how did you end up getting Ryder James to ask you to Homecoming?” Paige asks. “I’m shocked he’s even going.”

“I ran into him last night,” I admit, choosing not to disclose it wasn’t actually a chance encounter. “He asked me about Robert asking me. I told Ryder I turned him down, and then he asked me if I wanted to go with him instead.”

“Is this about getting back at Liam?” Kinsley asks.

“No. It has nothing to do with Liam,” I reply honestly. “I want to go with Ryder.”

“Really?” Kinsley responds dubiously.

“Really,” I confirm. “Is that really so hard to believe? I mean, you were talking about him in gym.”

“I think he’s super hot, yeah. But you don’t go to Homecoming with a guy just because you’re wanting to hook up with him, Elle.”

“I know. I’m going with him because I like him.”

“Do your parents know you’re going with him?” Paige inquires.

“No,” I admit. “This morning… well, I decided to wait a few days.”

“Right.” Paige snorts. “Maybe you shouldn’t have told the table first.”

It’s a fair point. Gossip flies around Fernwood faster than pollen in spring, especially when it involves the Clarkes. There’s an excellent chance my parents could hear who I’m going to Homecoming with from someone else now.

I shrug. “Who cares how they find out? It’s not going to change anything.”

Paige raises both eyebrows. “Did you pick that dress out this morning?”

I glare at her. “I let my parents dictate parts of my life because it’s easier. Because there are certain things that are important to them. Because I’m all they have left now. But some things are more important than their approval. I’m going to Homecoming with Ryder, no matter what they have to say about it.”

“Wow.” Kinsley looks surprised. “You really do like him.”

“Yeah,” I acknowledge. “I do.”

“Kennedy will get over it.” Paige finally answers my original question. “Pretty sure she already knew it was a lost cause.”

“I know you think I get everything I want, but I really don’t,” I inform her.

“Debatable,” Paige responds with a smirk. “But I was actually referring to the fact that every time I see Ryder James, he’s staring at you. And I think Kennedy looks at him more frequently than I do.”

“Oh,” I reply.

We reach the door for English, and Kinsley peels off with a “See you in gym, Elle!”

As soon as she disappears, Paige turns to me. “You ‘ran into’ him? What spots in town do you and Ryder James both frequent?”

I roll my eyes. “Fine, I tracked him down. Happy?”

“More like shocked. Where is my rule-following best friend and what happened to her?”

“Maybe she got sick of following the rules,” I respond.

Paige snorts. “So you’re going to start skipping school and get a tattoo?”

“No, I’m just going to Homecoming with Ryder.”

“Is that all you’re going to do with him? Go to Homecoming?”

“There’s not really anything I don’t want to do with him,” I admit.

“Wow.” Both of Paige’s eyebrows rise. “Isn’t that how people describe being in love?”

“I’m not in love with him. We’ve never even gone out on a date. I just—there’s something about him. Something about me when I’m around him.”

“Yeah, you’re in trouble.” Paige laughs. “Especially when your parents find out. Say what you want, but I know their opinions matter to you. And they’re going to have *strong* opinions about you and a guy from the trailer park.”

“Yeah. I know.” I shrug. “Ryder’s non-negotiable though.”

Paige sighs. “I should probably feel guilty, but I can’t wait to see what everyone has to say about this.”

“Yeah, you should feel guilty. You’re a horrible friend.” But I’m smiling as I say it.

“Come on. Let’s go hear about promiscuity.” Paige gives me a sly glance as she pulls out her copy of *The Scarlett Letter* in preparation for class. “Speaking of, when you say you tracked him down…”

“We’re going to be late,” I start rushing down the hall to English.

Paige follows, laughing.

I’m guessing my red cheeks answered her question.

Rather than dreading it, I rush to the locker room to change for gym. Ryder is already changed and waiting when I head into the gymnasium to wait for

the start of class.

“Hey,” I say as I approach, suddenly feeling shy.

“Hi.” He smiles. “You changed fast.” There’s a teasing undercurrent to his tone that makes me think he has an idea of what my motivation might have been.

“Uh-huh.”

“You know it’s football today?”

“It is?” My voice makes it clear that’s not welcome news.

“Yup.” He’s smirking now.

“Fantastic.”

“You haven’t picked up any tips attending every game?”

I eye him. “You know the team’s record, right? Even if I paid close attention to the games, I definitely would not be utilizing any of the football team’s strategies.”

Ryder snorts. “Yeah. I know the team’s record.”

“Do you—”

“All right, everyone! Gather round,” Coach Blake calls out. “Touch football today. *No* rough contact. Tackling is not going to go over well with me. We’ll count off for teams, then head out onto the field. Jenkins, you first.”

Jeff calls out “One!” and the count-off continues from there. I end up on team two. So does Ryder.

Coach Blake tosses the football to Ryder first, and I think back to the small snippet of their conversation I overheard on the second day of school. I didn’t get a chance to ask Ryder if he’s actually played before just now, but once the game begins, I find out the answer.

I wasn’t lying to Ryder earlier. I don’t pay close attention during our football games. I find the sport boring, honestly. Or I did. Until I saw Ryder playing it. His movements are a mixture of poetry and predatory. Innovative and intrinsic.

Only a few minutes pass before I give up on paying attention to anything else happening on the field. I’m not the only one. I see Steve and Jeff exchanging glances. Coach Blake is chewing furiously on the cap of his pen. Kinsley gives me a discerning glance as she approaches me.

“Did you know Ryder plays football?”

“Not really,” I reply honestly.

“Sure hope I’m not around when someone tells Liam.”

“I don’t think Ryder’s interested in playing an organized sport. Liam’s quarterback position is safe.”

“I was referring more to the fact you dumped him for someone who can actually throw a football.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s his own fault. Remember how he cheated on me and then announced it to half the senior class?”

“It was more like two-thirds.”

I roll my eyes again.

“He was drunk. And Stephanie said they were just kissing. I don't think Liam really expected it to be the end for you guys.” I open my mouth, but she keeps talking. “I’m not defending him. I think you two made more sense on paper. I’m just trying to explain why you moving on with Ryder James of all people is not going to go over well.”

Two tweets sound. “Class dismissed! Get changed. We ran long—only eight minutes left until the final bell.”

There’s a ripple of groans through the class. Nothing like having to quickly strip out of sweaty clothes. The air is cool and crisp today, but the sun has been beating down relentlessly. Everyone starts to trudge toward the school, and I glance around the group for Ryder. He’s up ahead.

“James! One minute,” Coach Blake calls, and I watch Ryder’s shoulders lift and drop as he lets out a long exhale.

He turns and starts walking back toward the field, tossing the football he’s still holding back and forth between his two hands.

“Nice arm, James,” I tell him as he’s about to pass me and Kinsley.

He flashes me his carefree grin, and Kinsley inhales sharply next to me. I’m not sure if it’s in response to the devastating expression or because I’m addressing Ryder so publicly. I’m not normally one for the public displays of affection he was asking about earlier. My compliment got the attention of the whole class.

“Pathetic effort, Clarke.”

Once again reverting to middle school behavior, I stick my tongue out at him. His dimples deepen as he passes me.

“Thought it’d be the best way to get the head cheerleader to go to Homecoming with me.”

The three people who weren’t paying attention to us before certainly are now.

“I already said yes!” I call after him.

He glances back over his left shoulder as he heads to talk to Coach Blake. “Just checking.”

“Yeah, okay. He’s not just hot.” Kinsley says as we approach the gym.

“No, he’s not,” I agree.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ryder's not in History the following morning. I spent the first three periods of the day worried he's upset the entire student body is gossiping about how we're going to Homecoming together. Anxious he's regretting our first bout of PDA. Concerned he's missing because something messy came up or because something happened with his mom.

I'm in a bad mood all morning as a result, and it worsens when I enter the lunchroom to see he's not at his usual table. Part of me was hoping he just overslept and missed History. I debate going over to Tommy to see if he knows where he is but decide against it. Desperate doesn't look good on anyone. I follow Paige and Kinsley over to our usual table instead.

I'm picking at my salad when Paige whispers "What happened to Ryder?" to me.

My head snaps up as I scan the room. "What are you talking about?"

"His face?" Paige raises both brows questioningly as she nods toward the front of the cafeteria.

Ryder's settling into a seat at his usual table. The skin surrounding his left eye is a swollen, shiny purple.

I snap the lid on the plastic container I was eating from and rise, grabbing my backpack from the tiled floor. "I'll see you later," I say to Paige.

I ignore all the stares following me as I walk over to Ryder's table. Danielle spots me coming and appears thoroughly displeased about it. Ryder's looking down at his food and doesn't glance up until I reach the edge of the table and speak, making my presence known.

“Can I talk to you?”

“Something wrong?”

“Have you seen your face?”

His jaw works furiously a couple times. “I’m fine, Elle.”

“We can talk about it here or we can talk about it outside. But we’re going to talk about it, Ryder.” I smile sweetly.

The gazes of everyone seated at his table bounce back and forth between the two of us. They’re obviously hoping for the former, but I’d prefer the latter. Obviously Ryder does too, because he rises, albeit with a long sigh that suggests he’s not thrilled about it.

He follows me out the double doors and into the grassy courtyard.

“Sit,” I instruct, nodding to one of the benches lining the perimeter.

With a roll of his eyes, he does.

I dig through my backpack until I find the small first aid kit I’ve carried around since freshman year but never opened.

As soon as Ryder sees it, he starts to stand.

I plop down in his lap, ensuring he can’t rise without dumping me to the ground. “Just let me put some stuff on it.” I squeeze some ointment out onto my pointer finger and then dab it around his eye.

He winces.

“Sorry,” I murmur.

Once I finish smoothing the ointment, I stay put. “What happened?”

No response.

I spin so I’m straddling him. We’re face to face now. “Ryder. What happened?”

“It doesn’t matter. Thanks for the lotion, or whatever you just put on my face.”

“Does the other guy look worse?”

He sighs. “Yeah.”

I keep looking at him expectantly, and he exhales again. “My mom told me who slapped her around a couple of nights ago.”

“Oh,” I respond eloquently. I wasn’t sure he’d admit what happened to me. I haven’t given any thought to what he might say if he did. But that’s not a scenario I would have come up with on my own regardless. “Is she doing okay?”

“Yeah. She’s fine. Not the first time it’s happened.”

I can see him shutting down, pulling away after that confession.

I do the only thing I can think of to halt the retraction.

I lean forward and kiss him, pressing our bodies together.

Ryder groans against my tongue as my hands wander into his hair. His hands slide up my thighs. After a few heated minutes, I pull away. “That’s my stance on PDA with you, by the way.”

Ryder wrinkles his brow. “You know what public means, right?” He glances around the empty courtyard.

I huff a laugh as I stand and smooth out the skirt of my dress. “You know the whole cafeteria looks out on this courtyard, right?”

Based on the look on Ryder’s face, he didn’t.

I toss him the tube of ointment. “Keep putting that on. The bruise will fade faster.” He nods as I swing my bag back on, still seated on the bench. “I’ll see you later,” I add before strolling off to the left. I can feel eyes on me—Ryder’s, or maybe some of the few hundred Fernwood High students with a clear view out the windows that comprise most of the back wall of the cafeteria. I wonder what it looks like to them.

Elle Clark is a known quantity. A reliable, responsible person. Rebelling against that is a recipe for widespread confusion. Like learning Santa doesn’t exist or your parents were once teenagers themselves.

I skirt along the edge of the school, past the obnoxiously large front entrance and through the extravagant landscaping. I need a moment. To recenter. Recalibrate. Refresh.

It’s always been clear to me just how different Ryder’s life is from my own, but I viewed it in more straightforward terms. My family’s wealthy; his is poor. I have no shortage of options; he has a finite amount. Freshman year, Ryder was much-needed reminder of all the world has to offer outside of Fernwood. But I didn’t grasp how scary that could be, along with thrilling.

Violence has never been a part of my world. It’s becoming increasingly evident it’s part—maybe a large part—of Ryder’s. I was grateful and flattered by his interference during the scene with Liam, but I viewed it as a singular event. Now it seems a lot more like a recurring one.

I’m not naive to the way the world works; I’ve just been sheltered from observing the harshest parts of it personally. The aspects of Ryder’s life he seems to accept as normal, or at least has come to see as such, are ones I’ve never witnessed. Never even considered what it might be like to. Maybe it

makes me the princess Danielle Collins called me. It definitely means I underestimated just how complicated things between us could get.

Not because I don't care enough to take the bad with the good.

Because I *do* care enough.

I take a seat in the gazebo nestled in the center of the gardens surrounding the school, staring out at the carefully spread mulch and neatly trimmed grass. I try not to think, just relish the unexpected moment of solitude. In the thrill of not being in the exact place I'm supposed to be at a given moment. I keep checking the time on my phone, though. It's one thing to skip out on the remainder of lunch. Fifth period English is another matter.

I head inside at exactly 12:29, smiling at the secretary as I enter.

"Elle!" She greets, clearly surprised to see me.

"Hi, Mrs. Brown," I respond. "I just had to run out to my car to grab something during lunch."

"Oh, all right." It's definitely not something students are meant to do, but Mrs. Brown doesn't seem the least bit inclined to chastise me. "Have a good rest of your day, Elle."

"Thanks, you too," I reply, as I pass her desk and head into the hallway. Students are just beginning to trickle out into the communal space, and progress is slow as I'm stopped multiple times on my trek to English.

Paige is already waiting in her seat when I enter the classroom.

"Hey," I say as I drop down in the chair next to hers.

"Oh, hey," she replies, smirking. "How was the rest of your lunch?"

"Fine."

"Looked like Ryder's a decent kisser."

I blush. "He is."

"If you've got it, flaunt it, right?"

I roll my eyes as class starts.

The rest of the day drags. But I rush to gym, eager to see Ryder. Except when I emerge out of the locker room, there's no sign of him. Other guys keep trickling out of the boy's, but Ryder never appears. I start to worry again.

It's day two of football, and my guess is Coach Blake is just as bothered by Ryder's absence as I am. The game proceeds at a snail's pace without him. Jeff and Steve mostly toss the ball back and forth between themselves for the length of class.

“Clarke!” Coach Blake barks out when class ends.

“Yes?” I turn around hesitantly, rather than trudging off the field.

“I need to speak to you about something.”

“Okay.” I tell Kinsley to go ahead and retrace the few steps I’ve taken over to Coach Blake.

“This stays between us, all right?”

“Um, okay,” I reply apprehensively. That’s a first for a conversation with any authority figure. Foreboding slithers down my spine.

“I need you to convince Ryder James to play in the Homecoming game Friday.”

I jerk my head back, surprised. Maybe I should have seen that coming after the conversation I overheard on the second day of school, not to mention the game yesterday, but I didn’t.

“I don’t know if that will be… possible,” I admit. “Ryder’s stubborn. I also don’t think he has any interest in playing.”

Coach Blake’s lips twist wryly. “Yes. I was made perfectly aware of both of those things during our past conversations with him on the topic.”

“Okay, then…”

“I think it will be better coming from a peer.” He emphasizes peer, and I realize the student body doesn’t comprise the only gossips in Fernwood. Clearly news of my Homecoming date has become even more widespread. “Also, I don’t have any other option right now. I need a quarterback for Friday night.”

“Need a quarterback? What about Liam?”

“Hathaway’s been suspended from the team for the time being. He can’t play in the next three games.”

“Suspended?” I gasp. “Why?”

“I’m not able to discuss the details. Remember what I said about this staying between us?”

I nod. “Right, okay.” But my mind is still swirling with potential explanations. Liam’s generally just as rule-abiding as I am. It’s hard to imagine what he could have possibly done to get in any form of trouble, never mind getting suspended from the football team for three games.

“You’ve seen every game for the past four years. Hathaway was our best option for quarterback.” I wince. Hard to imagine our team being any worse, but that’s clearly what Coach Blake is suggesting. “Just get James to play in three games, Clarke.”

“I’ll ask him,” I agree. “But I’m not making any promises.”

“That’s all I’m asking you to do,” Coach Blake assures me. “Thank you.”

I nod. “Have a good afternoon, Coach Blake.”

“You, too.”

Kinsley asks me what my conversation with Coach Blake was about as soon as I enter the locker room. I give her the same football team excuse as I did on the first day of school, when I actually stayed behind to talk to Ryder, except this time I guess it’s technically true.

After cheer practice ends, I head to the student council meeting. It’s filled with last minute Homecoming logistics. I let Caroline talk for most of it and rush out of the meeting the second it ends. The parking lot is practically empty, Betty is one of the few remaining cars on the rectangle of asphalt. Once in the driver’s seat, I debate for thirty seconds on what my destination should be.

Ten minutes later, I’m bouncing along the potholes that lead to the trailer park. Fernwood’s smoothly paved streets don’t extend to this part of town, clearly. The trailer park looks the exact same as it did during my last visit, right down to the lack of cars parked in front of Ryder’s home. He’s not here unless he parked his truck elsewhere. That seems unlikely, but I park anyway and walk up to the front door.

I bang it once. No response. A second bang, and Ryder’s mother appears

“Hi, Mrs. James,” I greet.

Ryder’s mother eyes me suspiciously. “You again.”

“Um, yes.”

“Ryder’s not home.”

I swallow a sigh when she doesn’t elaborate further. “Can I wait for him here?”

A slight widening of the doorway is the only response. I slip past Ryder’s mother into the kitchen. It’s cleaner than the last time I was in here, but only barely. The smell of artificial lemon lingers in the air, suggesting an attempt was made, at least.

“He should be home by six,” Ryder’s mother shares, heading over to the kitchen counter and starting to stuff the contents of a few paper bags into the cabinets.

“Okay.” I grasp the information eagerly. It’s quarter of now, according to the clock on the microwave. “Can I help put anything away, Mrs. James?”

She looks at me, and I experience the uncomfortable sensation of close scrutiny by someone I’m certain doesn’t like me all that much. “It’s Kat. No one’s called me Mrs. James since Joseph took his trip to the big house.”

“Oh. Okay.” I’m glad Ryder already told me about his father, but I don’t do a great job of hiding my shock regardless.

“You can unload that one.” Kat nods to the bag closest to me on the counter.

I step toward it eagerly, happy to have a concrete task to complete. I pull pretzels, cereal, and a bunch of bananas out of the paper sack, and then have to swallow some disgust when I encounter a can of sardines next. I hate fish.

Once I’ve put away the first bag’s contents, Kat pushes the next one in the line on the counter down closer to me. I take it to mean I did a tolerable job of unloading the first.

I’m only halfway through the next bag's contents when the front door bangs open. Danielle Collins enters the trailer. Followed closely by Tommy and Ryder.

All three of them stop like deer caught in headlights when they spot me.

“Hey.” Ryder's the first one to speak, and his voice doesn’t give me any indication about how he feels finding me in his kitchen.

“Hi,” I state, fiddling with the carton of raisins I’m holding. *No added sugar? How great.*

“I didn't know you were coming over,” he tells me. I’m not sure if it's an explanation, an apology, or an accusation.

“I know. I… want to talk to you about something.” That’s all I’m willing to share with an audience, and Ryder seems to recognize that.

“Give me a minute,” he tells Danielle and Tommy, then pulls me down the hall to his room. He shuts the door behind us and presses me against it. Before I can utter a word, he kisses me. I’m quickly lost in sensation.

Finally, I pull back. “That’s not why I came here. Although it’s definitely preferable to unloading containers of fish.” I wrinkle my nose.

“You don’t like fish?”

“Nope. It’s gross.”

Ryder rolls his eyes. “Why did you come over, Elle?”

“You weren’t in gym.”

“I had to leave early.”

“So today you attended… lunch?”

Ryder’s green eyes flash with irritation, drawing my attention to the bruise marring his right one. “What are you? The school secretary?”

“Coach Blake asked me to stay after gym. He wanted me to talk to you about playing football.”

His face hardens further. “I already told him no.”

“Yup, he mentioned that. I didn’t even know you played until gym yesterday.”

“I don’t, really. I joined a team in Florida for a few weeks because a buddy begged me to.”

I take the sign he’s capitulated on this topic in the past as a promising sign.

“And you’re good,” I state.

Ryder shrugs. “I’m all right.” We both know he’s more than ‘all right,’ especially after three years of Liam Hathaway leading Fernwood’s team, but I don’t push the point.

“Why won’t you play here, then?”

He sighs. “No point.”

“What do you mean? Our team is terrible. The *point* would be to win.”

Ryder shrugs. “Who cares if we win? Fernwood Football can keep being the laughingstock of the state, for all I care.”

“Well it would be nice to cheer for a touchdown, for once,” I reply.

Ryder shakes his head, letting out a short laugh. But it’s not a genuine sound; it’s a mocking, ugly one. “I should join the football team to help out the cheerleading squad? Seriously, Elle?”

“It’s not just that.” Wrong tactic, clearly. “Don’t you want to do something unexpected? Show everyone what you’re capable of?”

“Show off for a bunch of snobs who think I’m nothing but trailer trash, you mean?” There’s an angry edge to the question that makes it pretty obvious we’ve careened down a road that’s going to have an ugly end.

“That is not what I meant,” I respond, although it kind of was.

“If you want to date the Fernwood quarterback, you should have stuck with Hathaway,” Ryder snaps. “That’s not me. That will never be me.”

“I know,” I stress. “I don’t want to be with Liam. I hated all the football hubbub.”

“Then why the hell are you trying to push me into it?”

“Playing sports provides opportunities, Ryder. You could get a scholarship! Or you—”

Any emotion drains from Ryder’s face. “That’s what this is really about. You’re not just trying to make me fit in Fernwood. You want to be with a guy who’s going to college. Who’s got options in the future.”

Coach Blake owes me big-time. What was supposed to be a simple request has devolved into a real disaster of a discussion.

“Well, what is your plan? To have sex until I leave for college and then find a new hook-up?” I retort.

Ryder rakes a hand through his hair as his jaw moves rapidly. Yeah, I stepped too far. Way, way too far, if Ryder’s blank face is any indication. He’s retreating. Done.

“You knew how different our lives were when you started this again, Elle. I don’t know what else you want me to say.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

I spin and open his bedroom door, stalking down the hallway to the kitchen. Tommy and Danielle have taken seats on the living room couch. Kat is still moving about in the kitchen. None of them look at me, in a way that seems purposeful, and I really hope that doesn’t mean they overheard every word of the conversation Ryder and I just had.

“Nice to see you all,” I say as I head for the door.

Tommy gives me a tight smile. Kat studies me. Danielle doesn’t shift her eyes from the commercial playing on the television screen.

I head outside, only stopping to unload the heavy bag of dog kibble from my backseat. Guess I should have mentioned I’d brought it before bringing up football. The same stray who was here before watches me set it on the bottom step of the trailer’s stairs. There’s no way Ryder will miss it. I climb into my car, biting my bottom lip to keep the emotion contained. I hate how close to tears I am.

Ryder’s right, nothing’s changed.

Our argument just now didn’t reveal anything new.

It just reinforced it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE

Ryder and I ignore each other for the entirety of the following week. Coach Blake doesn't say anything else to me about Ryder playing. I guess he's surmised he sent me on a suicide mission. The collateral damage was a lot more than just his last hope of a win this season, though.

I'm sure the whole school is gossiping about how I appear to be down one Homecoming date, but Paige is the only person who asks me what happened. A curt "I don't want to talk about it," dissuades her quickly.

It's another stark contrast to my relationship with Liam. With him, I had friends helping compose texts to send. Planning out my outfits for our first few dates.

What happened with Ryder feels too raw.

Too personal.

Too meaningful.

My sixth period study hall is halfway over when I rise from my seat in the library and head out into the hallway to use the restroom.

"Hello, Clarke." I turn to see Coach Blake striding down the hall, holding a clipboard. A familiar sight. So is the suit he's wearing. Fernwood may be abysmal at football, but they could probably win a trophy for best-dressed.

"Hi, Coach Blake," I reply. "Ready for the game tonight?" I give him a hesitant smile. I don't normally pay close attention to the football team unless it directly impacts the cheer squad, but I realize I don't know who is playing quarterback tonight. I've shut out any reminders of my argument

with Ryder. The news of Liam's suspension still hasn't infiltrated the student body, making me wonder how it will be handled tonight.

"Sure am. Thanks again for talking to James, Clarke."

I shift uncomfortably at the reminder. "You're welcome. Sorry it was a wasted effort."

"What do you mean?"

I shoot him a curious glance, only to find he's giving me a similar look back. "Me asking Ryder to play quarterback? It didn't go well. More like a catastrophe, really, but—"

"James agreed to play on Monday."

I gape at Coach Blake. "He—he did?"

"Yup. Could've been more gracious about it, but he's even better than I thought. Kid can talk back all he wants if he keeps throwing rockets." He shoots me a discerning glance. "Don't tell him I said that."

"I won't," I assure him, opting not to include the fact I'm not talking to Ryder about anything these days.

Coach Blake nods, already continuing down the hall. "See you tonight, Clarke!"

Right. At the game I'll be attending. Which Ryder will apparently be playing quarterback in.

I continue down the hallway, not really registering the rows of lockers I'm walking past. Ryder seemed pretty damn set on not playing football. What changed his mind? What made him decide to play football and not patch things up between us? I didn't know anything had changed since our last conversation. But he did. He knew that I would see him emerge onto Fernwood's field with the rest of the team and find out that he had decided to play.

Ryder James is an endless mystery to me. One I should really give up on, but instead spend the afternoon puzzling over, right up until our second shared class. Except Ryder's not in gym. He hasn't been all week, and I've spent the same stretch of time trying and failing to convince myself it doesn't matter to me. Now, I realize he must be practicing, especially when I take note of the fact both Steve and Jeff are missing as well. I can't recall if they've been in class this week.

There's only one student whose attendance record I pay that close attention to. Unfortunately.

We don’t have cheer practice this afternoon on account of the game later, and I don’t have a student council meeting because everything’s already been planned for the dance tomorrow night, so for the first time since the start of senior year I head out the front doors with everyone else whose obligations end at three PM. Despite the freedom stretching before me until the start of the football game, I linger in the parking lot, making chitchat with some of the other cheerleaders. I give up when enough cars depart for me to tell without a doubt that Ryder’s truck is long gone.

I contemplate heading to the trailer park for a fraction of a second, but quickly dismiss the idea. Not only was my last trip there an unsuccessful one, but despite changing his mind about playing Ryder hasn’t made any attempt to thaw the ice between us this past week. During lunch and the two class periods we share, he’s acted like I don't exist. Not only does it not instill confidence in how amenable he might be to me showing up again, my pride is most definitely bruised. Setting myself up for more rejection is not an appealing prospect.

So, I head home.

As soon as I step through the front door, I regret doing so.

“Eleanor?” my mother calls out.

“Yes?” I reply, already wary. I’ve been receiving the cool treatment since my departure mid-dinner party. My sense of foreboding grows when I enter the living room to find my father is seated in his usual armchair. Home from work early? Even on a Friday? Terrible sign.

“What’s wrong?” I ask urgently.

“Take a seat, Eleanor,” my father instructs.

I listen, dropping my backpack on the floor and sinking into the soft cushions of the couch.

“I heard from Lynn Hathaway you’re involved with a boy from the trailer park.” I open my mouth, but it wasn’t a question. My mother keeps talking as though I’m a statue she’s lecturing. “I told her that’s ridiculous. That no daughter of mine would be involved with a resident of that crime-ridden community.” She raises both carefully shaped eyebrows at me, daring me to disagree.

Given the current state of my relationship with Ryder, I very easily could. They didn’t catch us making out in the front yard, or him sneaking into my bedroom. They’re sharing hearsay, and at this precise moment, I’m

not involved with a resident of the trailer park. I should give them the answer they want to hear, and that will be the end of it.

"Well, I am," I say instead. My response catches my mother off guard, my father, too. I don't think either of them actually believed there might be some validity to Liam's mother's gossiping. Regardless, I'm sure they expected me to deny it.

"You—you are?" my mother manages, visibly rattled. My father's giving Ryder a run for his money on a perfectly inscrutable expression, but I know that's the equivalent of a shock to him. His profession requires a perfect poker face: for negotiations, for depositions, for partner meetings. Or for learning his daughter is involved with a person he deems just as unsuitable as my mother does.

"Yes," I confirm. "His name is Ryder. We're going to Homecoming together."

"Ryder… James?"

"Yes…" I let a question linger at the end of the affirmation. Now, *I'm* surprised. My mother likes to pretend the trailer park doesn't exist, same as most of Fernwood's residents. I certainly didn't expect her to know any of its residents by name.

My mother looks like she's swallowed an especially bitter lemon rind.

"Well, we absolutely forbid it," my father jumps in. "No Clarke is going to associate with someone with that sort of background."

"Because he's not rich?" I scoff.

"Because he's a product of his environment. You are not to so much as speak to him again."

I've stumbled into a Victorian period drama where women are farmed out to the most eligible bachelor with the largest plot of land.

"We go to school together, Dad. If you don't want me to talk to Ryder, maybe you should work a little harder to get the trailer park expelled from town?"

My father stares at me in disbelief. Not so much because of my words, but the mocking tone I just delivered them in. Most definitely not an approved part of being a Clarke.

"If you feel as though you can't avoid the boy at school, then I'm sure Montgrove could be persuaded to take you for the remainder of the school year."

Boarding school. That’s how far my parents are willing to take this stand-off.

“I’ll be eighteen in four months, Dad. You can force me to do whatever you want for now, but there’s an expiration date.”

My mother’s mouth actually falls open; my father raises both brows. I’m calling their bluff. Shipping me off to boarding school two months into the school year would raise a lot of questions they wouldn’t possibly want to have to answer. That would be especially uncomfortable once I have a say in the matter.

“What on earth has gotten into you, Eleanor?” my mother questions, sounding aghast. “It was bad enough with Sarah…” All three of us wince at the reminder, but she soldiers ahead. “…but I never would have expected this behavior from you!”

“What behavior? I met a guy I like—really like—and you’re telling me I can’t *talk* to him again because he doesn’t come from money? You get how ridiculously pretentious that is, right?”

My father’s phone starts buzzing, and even before he speaks, I know that signals the end of this conversation. Sure enough, “I have to take this. We’ll continue this conversation tomorrow, Eleanor. Before the Homecoming dance.” He stands and leaves the room.

My mother sits and stares at me for a minute, then heaves out a beleaguered sigh before rising as well. “We just want the best for you, Eleanor.”

“You've never even met him, Mom.”

She sweeps out of the living room without another word.

I lean back against the cushions, letting out all the air in my lungs with an elongated *whoosh*. I knew my parents wouldn’t react well to learning about Ryder. I didn’t expect them to take it that poorly. Maybe I should have denied it. Or informed them there’s an excellent chance they have nothing to worry about.

A few minutes later, I haul myself upward, first off the couch, then up the stairs to my room. I still have a couple of hours before I have to leave for the football game, so I settle at my desk to start some of my homework. Wild Friday night I’m having right here. I shudder to think how my parents might handle having a child who misbehaves more than me.

Although, I guess they already did. Sarah’s petulance just never included a lower-class lover.

I outline my upcoming English essay until it's time to change into my cheerleading uniform. I shove a short dress my mother probably wouldn't approve of into my bag to change into after the game. If I'm going to approach Ryder tonight, which I still haven't decided I'm going to do, I want to look my best.

Neither of my parents are in sight when I descend the spiral staircase into our front foyer. Not entirely unusual, and I definitely don't seek them out in the wake of our conversation earlier. I climb into Betty and set off for the high school. It's a familiar routine that's taken place every Friday night in the fall for years. The new component is Ryder. Freshman year, I knew better than to look for him at a football game. I have no such assurance tonight.

I stop at Brewed Awakenings, simply for something to do. Like usual, I left the house earlier than I needed to, and I really don't need to be the one cheerleader watching the water boys set things up. There's only one older man reading a newspaper in the corner when I enter the coffee shop.

"Elle Clarke? In my coffee shop on a Friday night?"

I laugh as Joe gapes with mock-surprise behind the counter. I've ended up here on plenty of game nights.

"Hi, Joe."

"What'll it be tonight, darlin'?" he asks as he wipes the stainless-steel countertop.

I act as though I'm deliberating, simply to kill a little more time.

"Blueberry smoothie?"

He smiles, playing along. "Coming right up."

I pay, and Joe shifts to the right to start preparing my drink.

"Who comes to a coffee shop and orders a smoothie?"

I freeze, watching Joe glance behind me and then back to the blender. His expression doesn't change, but I can see the interest swirling in his eyes.

"Me." I don't look at Ryder, just shift all the way down to the end of the counter, directly below the sign that reads *Pick Up Here*. I'm pretty damn good at following directions.

Joe starts the blender, then returns to the cash register. I pretend to stare at the chalkboard menu, and actually assess Ryder and Joe talking. Joe gives Ryder the genuine smile I thought he reserves for me, and Ryder

laughs. Actually laughs. I'm not sure if I've ever seen that happen. Certainly never been the reason it did.

And now I'm jealous of the elderly man who charges me half-price for my drinks despite knowing the allowance my parents provide me with is probably more than his monthly income.

Ryder and Joe wrap up their conversation, and I return every ounce of my attention to the menu before me as I hear footsteps approach. Ryder doesn't say anything as he stops a few feet away, leaning casually against the counter. I chew the inside of my cheek in irritation as he fiddles with the display of straws.

"What are you doing here?" I finally snap, fed up with the crinkle of paper.

He stops.

"Getting coffee," Ryder responds.

The rustling commences.

"Fueling up for the big game?" I mock.

Ryder finishes fixing the few straws standing higher than the rest and then turns so he's facing me. He crosses his arms as he leans against the counter, and it's a battle to keep my eyes on his. One I win. Pride over hormones.

"Sure am." He mimics my tone.

I narrow my eyes, trying to decide how to proceed. Accuse him of changing his mind and not informing me? Even thinking the words makes me feel petty and foolish.

"Here's your smoothie, Elle." Joe sets the clear cup filled with purple liquid down in front of me, and then shuffles away, presumably to prepare Ryder's drink.

"Thanks, Joe." I call after him. Turning my gaze back to Ryder, I add, "Better do the trick."

Nothing changes. His face, his posture, and his voice all remain the exact same. Either encountering me here for the first time since our blow-up of a conversation is a non-event for him, or he's better at hiding his emotions than I am. I know the latter is true; I'm still deliberating on the former.

"I can throw a football, Elle."

"Yeah, I *know*, Ryder. That's why I suggested you should, but I seem to recall you having other feelings about it."

There’s a twitch in his jaw, and then the muscle sets off like a cow chewing cud.

“Good luck tonight.” I raise my smoothie in a mock cheers motion as I start walking toward the door.

“I don’t believe in luck,” Ryder informs me, unmoving from his casual slouch.

“Seems like that’s going well for you,” I reply as I saunter past him.

“Better be ready tonight, Clarke. You’re not going to be doing much sitting around.”

“Thought you weren’t interested in being a cocky quarterback?” I call over my shoulder as I walk out of the coffee shop. If he replies, it’s blocked by the door swinging shut.

“Holy shit! This is amazing!” Paige exclaims.

“Yup. Incredible,” I deadpan. She’s too excited to notice my lack of enthusiasm. It’s not just Paige. The whole cheer team is beside itself.

We’re cheering for the winning team, and that’s about as regular of an occurrence as marrying into the royal family. It’s happened a couple of times but tends to end unsuccessfully. Except right now, there are only five minutes left in the fourth quarter, and we’re *still* ahead. By two touchdowns, to be precise. Meaning Havenport has slim to no chance of tying or winning. Partly because their team morale seems to have hit a permanent low. They’re one of the better teams we play. I’m certain they showed up expecting to trounce us. Instead, they haven’t managed to pull ahead of us so much as once.

The reason for the numbers on the scoreboard below Fernwood is currently telling two junior linebackers something. I chew my lower lip as I watch the trio converse. I should be thrilled. Instead, I’m annoyed and confused as I try to figure out why Ryder would reject this role and then accept and excel in it.

Why he would let it snowball into an argument between us and never attempt to make amends.

Why nothing he’s done has made me like him any less.

There’s a roar from the crowd, and I jerk back into the present. Fernwood has the ball again, and one of our wide receivers is sprinting down the field. The brown spiral of a barely weathered football flies through the sky, and then lands in waiting arms. A couple dozen yards, and we’re now up by six more points. Our kicker misses, but it doesn’t dim the euphoria of the crowd.

“We’re going to win!” Kennedy announces. “We’re going to win a freaking football game!”

The crowd has come to the same conclusion. Unfamiliar eagerness courses through the fall air, mingling with the buttered popcorn scent emanating from the concession stand. Results are what matter to most of Fernwood’s residents. Ryder’s delivering in that regard, and it seems to have temporarily washed away any wariness about his home address. I almost wish my parents were here to witness it firsthand. They’ve never attended a Fernwood football game. My father prefers taking clients to professional games rather than those played at the high school level, and they don’t consider cheerleading to be a sport worth watching at all. It’s not a view they’re alone in, but it’s an opinion I’m guessing one attempt at a back handspring would change.

The final whistle sounds, and we all freeze. This part is uncharted. Normally we just collect our things and slink off the field. The team is celebrating, and a few members of the squad trickle onto the grass to share their congratulations. I remain in place, just witnessing the scene. I can’t bring myself to go out on the field, even to congratulate the guys I’ve spent years cheering for. Who I’ve seen disappointed over and over again. Because I’m too uncertain about what the guy responsible for this victory might say or do.

I feel eyes on me as I pack up my gear and head for the locker room. Usually, I lounge around on the benches following a game. Tonight, I’m a woman on a mission. I’ve finished showering before the full team is even back in the locker room. Paige lets out a low whistle as she opens the locker next to mine.

“Damn.” She eyes the short, blue dress I’m wearing. “Someone’s got big plans tonight.”

“We’ll see,” I reply, unclipping my hair so it tumbles down my back.

“Uh-huh,” Paige smirks as she changes out of her cheer uniform.

For once, Paige is the one waiting for me to finish getting ready. Actually, most of the squad is. There's absolutely some intrigue about what's going on between me and Ryder, and I don't actually mind it.

Strolling out into the parking lot to double takes and whispers doesn't feel terrible, either. It actually feels pretty damn good. I've got plenty of confidence, but this feels different. I feel bold, and it's a feeling I cling to as I approach the moment I'll see Ryder again.

I head for Betty, and Paige walks over to her sedan in the spot next to mine. "Did you see Kennedy's dress?" she asks as we step out of earshot from the rest of the squad.

"Yeah," I reply. Kennedy's wearing the same dress I am. Ever since I made my interest in Ryder known, she seems to have doubled down on imitating me. "Probably just a coincidence."

"Or she buys all the same clothes as you do to increase the odds." Paige rolls her eyes.

I shrug before climbing into my car. Kennedy's fashion choices are low on my list of concerns at the moment. I ride the boldness I'm experiencing right into the post-game celebration, striding into Robert's kitchen ten minutes later like it's a catwalk.

I study the array of alcohol out on the counter, settling on ginger ale and vodka. Paige and Kinsley both look surprised, but neither say anything as I lean against the kitchen counter, sipping my simple cocktail.

Some football players start to filter into the kitchen, and I congratulate the ones I should have said something to earlier.

I'm talking to Jack Rodgers when I feel the energy in the room shift. I tense before I glance over. Green eyes slam into mine, emphasized by the darker shade of his hair thanks to the shower he must have taken right after the game. His friend Tommy is with him, and Danielle Collins leaves her spot at the island to beeline toward them. But Ryder's eyes stay on me.

Electricity crackles between us, tangible as the smell of alcohol in the air. I raise my cup and tip it toward him, the same way I did in Brewed Awakenings earlier.

He stays stoic. Ryder James has one hell of a poker face. But for some reason, I feel like I can sense he's amused. Finally, he returns the motion, gesturing back to me with the beer bottle he's holding.

Danielle says something to him, and our eye contact is broken. I nod along to what Jack is saying, without really listening to what is coming out

of his mouth.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm still in the same spot. A few more people have joined my conversation with Jack, requiring even less input from me. Allowing for more time to watch Ryder. His group has expanded as well. I finish my drink and pour another one. Then finish that one as well. Alcohol and impatience are what propel me across the room.

"Want to dance, James?" Ryder just looks at me. His gaze drops to my dress, and his jaw clenches. I hold my ground. "Limited time offer," I add.

Finally, some emotion breaks through. "How long do I have?" He takes a sip of beer.

"Ten seconds," I throw back.

He's grinning now. "Okay, I'll take it." Ryder sets his bottle of beer on the counter and grabs my hand, pulling me into the living room. There are a few couples dancing, but not many. I have a feeling we'd be attracting this many stares even if it were packed, though. Especially since Ryder pulls me to him like there's a slow song playing, not an upbeat pop one.

"Does this mean you're not mad at me anymore?"

"I'm plenty mad at you," I assure him. "Just got sick of waiting for you to do anything but stare at me."

He laughs. "Yeah, that's fair."

"Why did you decide to play? Why didn't you tell me you had decided to play? We could have avoided that whole fight."

"We weren't fighting about football, Elle." He glances away, then back at me again. "I'm never going to be that guy who fits in your life. Even if I had the money to go to college next year, I wouldn't. I've always hated school. I want to do something where I can sit back at the end of the day and see what I've accomplished. I like working at the garage."

"How do you know you don't fit in my life?" I reply. "I don't even know what my life is going to look like yet."

"Yes, you do."

"Things change, Ryder. Plans change. You may think you know me, but you don't. Not yet."

He raises one eyebrow in response to my flirty tone. "What don't I know about you, Elle Clarke?"

"Well…" A familiar song starts to play, and I let a sultry smile unfurl across my face. "I'm a pretty good dancer." I twist so my back is to Ryder's front. I *am* a good dancer, especially when I have a planned routine. And it

just so happens Paige and I spent last summer choreographing moves to songs we knew the administration would never let us use for the cheer team. “Lil Bit” was one of them, and it’s currently blasting through the living room. I lose myself in the pulse of the beat of the music as I spin, twirl, and grind. Some of these moves are ones which definitely would not be approved for a school event, even paired with a tamer song.

Ryder appears pretty stunned when the song ends and I twist back around, and there are some shocked expressions on other people in the living room as well by the time the next tune begins to play.

“Shit,” he breathes, and it’s pretty fantastic for my ego.

I kiss him, letting the same wild energy that’s governed me ever since the end of the football game take over again. “I’m going to grab a drink. Meet me upstairs?”

Ryder nods, still looking a little dazed. I smirk, then head for the kitchen. Awed glances track my progress to the fridge. I open the door to grab a bottle of water, and then someone slams it shut.

“Please tell me you didn’t do the ‘Lil Bit’ routine at a party in front of Ryder James, and I missed it.”

“I didn’t do the ‘Lil Bit’ routine at a party in front of Ryder James, and you missed it,” I tell Paige.

She rolls her eyes. “Damnit. Last time I’m playing beer pong in the garage.”

I reopen the fridge and grab a bottle of water. I unscrew the lid and guzzle some. Turns out dirty dancing on a guy is really dehydrating.

“So?! How was it?”

“I remembered all the moves. Ryder definitely enjoyed it,” I give her a sly smirk.

“Yeah, I’m sure he did.” Paige returns it.

I gulp some more water, and then screw back on the lid. “He’s waiting for me upstairs, so I’ll see you later.”

Paige shakes her head, smiling. “Okay, we’re going to need to have a *long* talk tomorrow. And you also need to reenact the dance as part of it.”

“Deal,” I agree. “See you later.”

“There’s a banana on the counter, if you need a quick tutorial on—”

“Shut up,” I hiss.

Paige laughs loudly, then heads toward the living room. I walk toward the stairs. The front door is slightly ajar, and I go to close it. Just as I’m

about to, I hear a quiet sniffle. I pull it open wider instead. I'm shocked to see Danielle Collins sitting on the railing, staring out into space. I glance back behind me. No one else is in the entryway. Everyone's congregated in the kitchen or living room.

"Danielle?" I say softly, stepping out onto the front porch.

Her head jerks upright, and she hastily swipes at her cheeks.

"Uh, are you okay?" I ask awkwardly. It's pretty obvious she's not, but we're not exactly close friends.

"Yeah. Fine." The words are clipped.

"Do you want me to get anyone? Tommy? Or Ryder?"

She sniffs, then scoffs. "Absolutely not. Tommy will say he told me so."

"Told you what?"

Danielle stares straight at me. "That Ryder has feelings for you."

"Oh," is all I can say. The pieces suddenly fall together. She's out here because she's upset about me and Ryder. Meaning I'm the absolute last person she probably wants to witness this. Her animosity at the pond makes a little more sense now. "I'm really sorr…"

My apology is drowned out by sirens. Not a single, passing one. By multiple ones that are suddenly here and on top of us. At least three police cars park haphazardly on the street, blocked from getting closer by the dozens of vehicles filling the driveway and lining the road. The front door opens, and people start to pour out of the house, running for cars and slamming doors. I get swept up in the swell of movement, looking around for Paige or Ryder. I can't find either of them.

Eventually, I give up, heading for Betty and climbing inside. Cars peel out to the left and right, filled with panicked students hoping this night won't end up on their permanent record. I commiserate with the alarm a little more when I realize it's not just Fernwood police here. Some of the police cars are from Brighton, the neighboring town. It's larger, and much less affluent. They usually only step in on larger incidents and have a reputation for being far less forgiving than Fernwood's two officers. Their presence is what jolts me into motion.

I turn on my convertible and follow the line of taillights down the street. My parents are mad enough already. I let out a sigh of relief when none of the cops pursue us. Rather than go home, I head for the field. I park in the same spot Ryder left his truck in the last time I was here and pull out my

phone to text him. I drum my fingers against the steering wheel as I wait for him to respond, filled with nervous energy.

My phone finally buzzes, but it’s not a text. Paige's calling me.

“Hey,” I answer. “How crazy was that? Did you get out okay?”

“Yeah, I did.” There’s a weird note in her voice, but I’m too buzzed to let it register.

“It seriously was like something out of the movies. Although it wasn’t the worst timing ever. I was talking to Danielle, and—”

“Where are you, Elle?” Paige interrupts.

“At the field. I'm waiting for Ryder.”

There’s a long pause. “He’s not coming,” Paige finally says.

“What are you talking about? Are you with him?”

“No. He was… arrested.”

“What?! They actually arrested people for underage drinking? Seriously? I’ll go down there now. I can get my dad—”

She interrupts me again. “That’s not why they arrested him, Elle. They’re saying…”

Paige keeps talking and talking, but I stop registering anything she’s saying. I stare out at the field I equally love and loathe. This is where we started. Maybe it’s fitting this is where we end.

It sounds arrogant, but I’ve always considered myself the type of person who bad things don’t happen to. I haven’t suffered any direct hits, but I’ve caught plenty of collateral damage. The shrapnel seems to always hit my heart.

I think of Ryder's mother, who’s struggled so much already. Of Christopher, who relies on Ryder. Of that sad, stray dog who’s probably curled up behind the trailer waiting for Ryder to come home and feed him.

It’s the thought of that dog waiting forever that breaks through the shock.

Tears start falling.

They don't stop for a while.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TEN

OceanofPDF.com

PRESENT DAY

The easiest way to differentiate locals from tourists in the city is their pace. Any full-time resident tends to stride along to their destination. Temporary visitors lollygag in order to check maps and take selfies.

Usually, I fall firmly into the first category as a reliable speed-walker. Even if I'm just headed out shopping or going to meet Paige so we can get our nails done. I pride myself on appearing as though I always have someplace important to be. Today? I'm ambling along like I just disembarked a plane from Kansas.

My phone won't stop vibrating, but I'm barely cognizant of the constant buzzing. My whole body feels numb.

Around me is endless activity. Horns honking, pedestrians shouting, pigeons swarming. I'm a one-woman island of apathy. And I embrace it. I can feel the emotion simmering and boiling beneath the surface. I'm a dam, and I know I'll eventually burst.

Eleanor Clarke always deals with things head-on. Handles them. Sorts feelings into clear stages and steps.

Elle Clarke reacted impulsively. Ignored things she didn't want to do. Was brazen and emotional and unafraid to show it.

I thought I'd left the girl who did things she wasn't supposed to back in high school. That I'd had bouts of rebellion because all teenagers do.

Today's events suggest an entirely different cause.

The glass lobby of my father's law firm appears on my left. Without realizing it, I just walked fifteen blocks. I put on a cute pair of wedges this

morning, intent on looking my best as a newly engaged woman. I'm pretty sure they must have left blisters by now, but again—I'm numb.

I give my name at the front desk and am whisked into a shiny elevator to be transported up to the ten floors that are my father's pride and joy.

"What number?" the attendant asks.

"110," I reply.

He gives me a long side glance. "110?"

"My father's the managing partner. Michael Clarke," I state. I don't recognize my own voice. It's the tone of someone who just learned the world's a different place than they thought it was this morning. "I'm in a rush," I add, with a bit of the native snark my last few sentences lacked.

No idea if it was name-dropping my father or dropping the polite tone, but the elevator finally begins to rise upward. The attendant doesn't make any small talk, just holds an arm out to keep the doors open when they slide apart to reveal the swanky entrance to the floor that houses the senior partners' offices.

I stride into the swanky reception area and down the hallway leading to the largest corner office. My arrival causes a stir. Clients don't venture here. The 110th floor is reserved for the fat cats at the top of the food chain, and those who serve them. I leave a series of scrambling secretaries in my wake, trying to figure out why I'm here and whether I have any right to be. I ignore calls of "Miss! Miss! Excuse me, miss!" and home in on the door engraved with *Michael Clarke*. It's shut. Probably means he's in the midst of an important meeting or on a phone call with an associate in London.

I barge in anyway.

The young blonde leaning over my father's desk lets out a startled screech, straightening and stuttering back a couple steps. My father's seated at the desk, signing some documents. I'm assuming the woman is here to collect them. I'm also surmising that's not all she's here for, based on her not-so-innocent reaction to my unexpected entrance.

I ignore the blonde and focus my attention on my father. "I need to talk to you, Dad."

"Come back for these later, Sharon," he instructs the woman.

She scurries out into the hallway, shutting the door behind her.

"My newest secretary."

I scoff as I drop into one of the cushy armchairs that face the Boston skyline. I don't know—and don't want to know—if my father has ever

outright cheated on my mother, but I've seen his eyes wander enough it's a wonder they're still in their sockets. "I got a call from a nonprofit this morning," I state.

"I don't know why you bothered applying for other jobs, Eleanor. This is one of the best firms in the city. Only an idiot would turn down a position here to work at a nonprofit—"

"It was about Ryder James. They're working on his case," I tell the soaring skyscrapers.

No response, and I shift my eyes from the view to my father. He leans back in his chair, expression inscrutable. I study him; he stares back.

"You knew," I realize. "You already knew."

"Yes."

"How?"

My father lets out a beleaguered sigh, like answering my question is beneath him. "I played golf with Brent Andrews a couple weeks ago. He mentioned it. His firm has done some pro bono work with Until Proven Guilty."

"And you didn't tell me?" More accusation leaks into my voice with each syllable I speak.

"It didn't seem important."

"Didn't seem *important*?" I can't recall the last time I dared to raise my voice to my father, but that last word creeps into my upper register of volume.

My father leans forward, resting his forearms on the massive mahogany desk sitting between us. "Do you know why Brent mentioned it to me? Because he remembered how people talked about how *obsessed* you were with that boy in high school. My daughter was besotted with a boy who ended up a convicted criminal, and seven years later, we still haven't shaken the association."

Neither my parents nor I have touched the subject of Ryder James since the night I came home crying from Homecoming seven years ago. The condescension and anger in my father's voice once would have deterred me from ever speaking his name again. But new knowledge buoys me.

"What if he didn't do it?"

"He pled guilty, Eleanor. No organization of bleeding hearts who attended law schools so low in the rankings you'd need a GPS to find them is going to overturn a guilty plea."

“They have limited resources, Dad. You know as well as I do, they wouldn’t have taken his case if they didn’t think there was a good chance.”

My father raises his eyebrows in an expression that has made many a person shirk. Including me. It’s a clear you’re-an-absolute-idiot-for-thinking-that look. But the same insensibility that has encompassed me ever since I answered my phone earlier makes me impervious to it right now.

I stand, feeling a twinge of pain in my feet. I hope the burst of feeling is not indicative of a larger wave of emotion coming. But I can feel the tide rising, and it seeps into my voice.

“You should have told me, Dad.”

Indifference and I are rapidly parting ways.

“It’s been seven years, Eleanor. You’re engaged. Leave that boy and his mistakes in the past.”

My father’s a rational man. Who thinks things through and balances options. Ordinarily, I think most people would describe me similarly. He’s right. It’s been seven years since I let Ryder James infiltrate my life. A length of time much longer than most people would deem necessary to get over a high school fling.

But Ryder James has always been my *what if*. That niggling thought in the back of my head. When I graduated from high school. When I moved out of my parents’ house. When I graduated college. When I moved into my own apartment. When I graduated law school. When I said yes to William last night. The path that could have sent me careening in a very different direction had the night of the Homecoming football game ended differently.

“I’m not going to make it to the dinner tonight,” I inform my father.

“What do you mean, you’re ‘not going to make it to the dinner tonight’?” he asks, a note of warning clear in his voice. “It’s your engagement party! Your mother has been—”

“I won’t be there, Dad.”

I start toward the door.

“Eleanor, don’t you dare…”

I slam the door to his office shut behind me, and it’s the first time since the woman from the nonprofit said Ryder’s name that I feel a bit better. Finally, one when I really need it.

The small burst of satisfaction fades as I walk down the hall lined with secretaries staring at me. I guess they took the amount of time I spent in my father’s office as a sign I am in fact, allowed to be here, because no one is

attempting to call security and force my exit from the floor to proceed any more quickly. I could really care less either way. I'm more focused on how I just decided I'm spending my afternoon, instead of preparing for the dinner I know my mother has been organizing for months.

I have no idea how my parents will explain my absence from the celebration of my engagement to William York, and I don't really care. There's only one person I feel any guilt about missing it toward. But even picturing William's disappointed face is not enough to alter my plans. I take a few deep breaths as I step in the elevator and whizz back down to the lobby.

As I walk across the marble floor, I pull my phone out of my pocket. I inhale deeply, and then press his name.

"How's my fiancée?" William answers on the second ring.

I smile, but it quickly fades. "Hey," I reply. "I'm good. But I have to tell you something, and you're not going to be very happy about it."

"Okay…" William replies, understandably apprehensive.

"I can't make it to our dinner party tonight," I rush out.

"What? Why not?" There's some irritation and indignation now.

I've never lied to William before—not about anything important, at least—and I'm surprised by how easily the fibs fall off my tongue. "That firm in California called. They want me to come out for an interview first thing tomorrow. I have to leave tonight."

William sighs, but there's no anger anymore. Work is something he understands. My actual destination is something he would not. "I thought you said you only applied there on a whim."

"I did. But it's good to keep options open. You'd be willing to move to the West Coast, right?"

He's not. William's father works on the floor I just left, two doors down from mine. I know it's been William's dream to follow in his father's footsteps at the same firm since childhood. William seems to genuinely want the exact things his parents want for him. I wish I could say the same. It would make my life a hell of a lot easier.

"We can talk about it if you get the job," William finally responds.

"Okay." I don't push it. I haven't actually gotten an interview, much less the job. Even if I did, I resigned myself to living in Massachusetts a long time ago. The same way I'll probably end up working at my father's firm, no matter how many other positions I get offered.

“I’m sorry. I know it’s terrible timing,” I add. “I’ll make it up to you when I get back.”

“It’s fine, I know last night was a surprise. Let me know when you’re there. I love you.”

“Love you, too.” I hang up, swamped with guilt. I’m a terrible person. Or a terrible fiancée, at the very least.

I hail a cab and finally respond to some of the messages littering my screen. I feed Brooke, Avery, and Maddie the same lie I told to William. It doesn’t really explain why I fled the cafe before I’d even entered it, but none of them seem concerned about that particular detail. They all respond with excitement and palm tree emojis that prompt fresh waves of guilt. But it’s not enough to keep me from exiting my messages and opening up my contacts.

“Hey, Eleanor!” Jessica answers on the very first ring.

“Hi, Jess. How are you feeling?”

“Ugh,” she groans. “Morning sickness is still all-day sickness. I’m going to be a bit of a wet blanket at Eliza’s bachelorette party, I’m afraid.”

“It’s Eliza. Things won’t be that crazy, anyway.”

“We’re going to Vegas, Eleanor. I’ve seen *The Hangover*.”

I laugh.

“So… what’s up?”

“I need a favor.”

“Okay…”

“Are you still good at digging stuff up?”

“Oh my god! Something to actually do! Yes, I’m still a fantastic internet stalker. What do you need?”

I pause, glancing at the cabbie and then back out the busy street. “I need to know where an inmate is being held. Which prison.”

There’s silence on the other line. “Okay, not what I thought you were going to ask for,” Jessica finally replies. “Is this the same Eleanor Clarke I met at freshman orientation who was wearing a floral headband and a pressed blouse?”

“It’s for a pro bono case I’m helping out on.” Lying seems to be one of those things that gets easier the more you do it.

“Oh, okay. Yeah, that’s easy. What’s the prisoner’s name?”

“Ryder James.” My voice is thicker than usual, and I hope it doesn’t translate over the line.

“Do you know the middle name?”

“Jordan.”

“Okay. I’ll call you back when I have it.”

“Thanks.” I hang up and resume staring out the window, glad she didn’t ask any more questions. Specifically, what he’s in prison for.

A few minutes later, the cab pulls up in front of the brownstone I’ve called home since graduating college three years ago. I pay the cabbie and head up the front steps. I can hear Scout scrambling around inside as soon as I shove my keys in the lock.

Last summer, I was walking along the Charles with Brooke when we came across a foster pet fair. I’d never considered myself an animal person. I didn’t grow up with pets. But something about one furry face made me stop. I told myself—along with a dubious William and friends—that I was only going to foster the puppy until a forever home came along. But when the shelter told me they were getting some interest, I told them I was keeping him rather than handing him back over. A year later, it’s hard to imagine my life without the Australian Shepard mix.

Scout pounces as soon as I get the door open, barking joyfully as he leaps and runs around me. I’m rarely home in the middle of the day, and he’s making his appreciation for my early return known. I drop to the floor, rather than venture further into the entryway, letting him sit in my lap and tilt his furry head back to lick my face.

“Hi, buddy,” I scratch the spot behind his ears that always makes him pant with happiness. “Miss me?” He barks.

I got Scout when he was only a few months old, but I’m guessing he had a rough start to life, because he’s incredibly wary of people. I seem to be the only person he actually likes. He barks at strangers—along with people he’s been around a lot, like William—until I tell him not to. He still won’t let anyone else pet him for any extended length of time. I got plenty of gentle suggestions I let him go to a new home after first announcing I’d decided to keep him, but everyone seems to have finally accepted the fact he’s here to stay. I’m more attached to him than I ever imagined being to a canine.

“Come on.” I stand to head up the stairs, and he trots after me.

I’m halfway through packing an overnight bag when Jessica calls me back.

“What sort of case are you working on?” she asks as soon as I answer.

Crap. “Uh—I don’t know all the details yet. I just joined it,” I reply.

“Well, the guy you asked about is at Pennfield. The only maximum-security prison in the state. *Not* a nice place.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“No problem. It was easy to find. Much more exciting than staring at a blank page.”

“Writing not going well?”

“Nope. I’m starting to think all the people who laughed at me when I told them I was going to write a book had a point.”

“Maybe our trip to Vegas will spark some creativity. You could write a book about a murder at a casino or a hidden message in the slot machines.”

There’s a scratching sound in the background, like pen scrawling across paper. “Oooh, that’s good. Maybe you should use your Harvard degree for a creative cause, too. Your imagination is lost on writing legal briefs.”

I let out a dry laugh. “Yeah. Maybe. See you next weekend.”

“Bye, Eleanor.”

I finish packing and then am faced with the dilemma of what to wear. I end up changing out of the sundress I put on this morning into a pair of dark skinny jeans and a peach colored blouse. And flats. My feet are officially killing me. I grab my trench coat out of the hall closet, and then set about gathering all of Scout’s necessities. It’s a testament to how little regard anyone in my life has for him that no one bothered to ask what I planned to do with Scout during my West Coast trip. If I really were going to California, I’d have to take him to a kennel. But despite Boston’s location on the easternmost side of the state, it’s impossible to remain within the boundaries of Massachusetts without driving less than three and a half hours. An easy drive for a dog to join on. Plus, I could really use the emotional support.

I transport Scout and our combined luggage outside and into my silver sedan. It’s a beautiful day, and I think nostalgically of Betty. The red convertible got traded in when I left for college.

I Google the address for Pennfield, and it pops up immediately. It’s a three-hour drive, clear on the opposite side of the state. I start the directions, turn on the radio, and begin driving. Weaving along the brick street I live on and then through the bustling city takes some concentration, but pretty soon there’s nothing but a clear stretch of asphalt stretching before, which doesn’t take any brainpower to navigate. I’m stuck with my thoughts as

brown trees fly by, dotted with green leaves just beginning to emerge as spring prepares for summer. Stuck reliving things I've tried really hard to forget.

After Ryder's arrest, I immediately left Fernwood to finish high school at the boarding school I attended before my father ran for Fernwood's school committee. Then off to college. Then I went to law school. All were fresh, clean starts. I made a concerted effort to spend as little time in Fernwood as possible during breaks and summers. My childhood friends never brought him up. My parents wouldn't either. The few reminders Ryder exists are the ones I've allowed in. The charity I started. The scholarship I allocated. The memories I've thought about often enough to know they're perfect recollections.

I turn the music up for a Taylor Swift song but switch the radio off entirely when "Kiss Me" begins to play. I still can't listen to that song without being reminded of the night in the garage with Ryder.

Scout is snoring in the backseat, completely oblivious to the inner turmoil I'm experiencing. I feel like it's a low point when you're jealous of a dog's life, but I'm definitely envious of Scout's right now.

It starts to drizzle two hours into the drive, coating the asphalt with a constant sprinkling of water. I press down on the gas pedal a little harder. Civilization continues to give way as I near the base of the Berkshires. The roadside attraction signs cease showing anything unrelated to nature. Rest areas grow further and further apart. The navigation system informs me to take the next exit. Dread and anticipation swirl in my stomach as I follow its instructions. Overgrown greenery lines the road that leads to the prison. I drive less than a mile before I don't need the directions any longer. It's pretty obvious where my destination is.

The prison complex is plopped in the middle of a wide circle of cleared land that spills outside the tall, imposing fence that surrounds the collection of buildings. I drive through an open gate coated with barbed wire into a parking lot comprised of cracked cement, stopping just to the right of a gray metal door with faded white letters reading *VISITOR ENTRANCE*. That's me, I guess. There's only one other car in the lot; a Chevy so coated with mud it's impossible to tell what the paint color is.

I crack a window for Scout and step out of my car, shrugging my trench coat on. It's a lot cooler on this side of the state. The combination of the nearby mountains and earlier rain has saturated the air with a clean, pure

scent that seems out of place so close to what is without a doubt the most depressing-looking building I've ever seen. It suddenly strikes me how the three years of schooling I just completed provided me with the power to sentence someone to spending a significant length of time here.

I cross the lot and pull open the gray door, stepping inside the building tentatively. The crisp air is replaced by a stale, stagnant scent that suggests the residents of the building don't have much, if any, chance to appreciate the fresh air outside. For some reason I expected to step into a hallway lined with cells, but the tiny lobby I emerge inside reminds me of a police station. Or a hospital. There's a short stretch of orange plastic chairs along one wall. Above it are framed posters listing the long array of items one can't bring into a prison. A tall series of shelves covers the other. Books fill them, which surprises me. They're an eclectic collection: in shape, color, and condition.

"Can I help you?"

I turn my gaze to the desk on the far side of the room, which isn't saying much. It only takes me a few steps to reach the edge of it. Or as close to the edge as I can get, rather. There's a tall, thick wall of impenetrable glass entirely surrounding the tired, middle-aged woman seated behind the desk. A few scratches and scrapes mar the surface, suggesting someone did in fact try to get past it. A metal detector sits to the right.

"Yes, I'm here to visit someone," I tell her.

"Name?"

"Eleanor Clarke."

"The inmate's."

"Oh. Ryder James," I reply. It's a little less weird every time I say his name, but the syllables still feel strange on my tongue.

"No visitors."

"Are the hours over?" I pull my phone out of my pocket. It's quarter of five. Do prisons follow the same schedule as convenience stores? "I can be out of here by five, if that's the problem."

"That inmate isn't accepting visitors. That's the problem, ma'am."

"Oh." That possibility hadn't occurred to me. "Why is that?"

The woman snaps her gum as she shrugs. "Above my pay grade. I just do what the computer tells me to."

"Is there someone I could speak to who might know?"

“No.” She turns back to the computer screen.

“Are you sure? It’s very important that I speak to him. I came a long way.”

“I’m sure.” She still doesn’t look at me.

“Please.” I spent the entire drive fixated on seeing Ryder. Panicking. Planning. The possibility I wouldn’t be able to never occurred to me.

The woman finally glances my way. I shift under her scrutiny. She’s got the clear air of someone who deals with a lot of unpleasant encounters and is generally expecting unpleasantness as a result. “There’s nothing I can do except give you some friendly advice.”

“Advice?” On how to visit an inmate?

“You seem like a nice enough lady.” She gives my expensive clothes a pointed look. “This isn’t a place you happen to stop by. A place you should stop by if you can help it. And I’m not the only who thinks so, clearly.”

“What?” I’m completely confused now.

“Inmate you’re asking to see? Is not accepting visitors named Clarke.”

I open my mouth, then close it again. “I’m on a list of people who can’t visit him?”

“What I just said, isn’t it?”

“Are there other people he’s not seeing?”

She shakes her head.

“So… that’s it?”

“That’s it.” The phone rings. “Have a nice night.”

She picks up the phone and starts speaking to someone, but I tune out their conversation. I stare as far down the dark hallway behind her as the fluorescent lights allow. Ryder is somewhere in this building. I drove over three hours to see him. And I can’t. Because *he* ensured I wouldn’t be able to.

I leave the building in a daze. It’s started to sprinkle again, and Scout has his nose poked out of the slightly open window, sniffing at the raindrops. I climb back into the driver’s seat, and he climbs in the front so he can snuggle in my lap. We sit there together.

Me disbelieving.

Scout disinterested.

It’s not even five yet. I could easily make it back to the city tonight. Would only be one hour late for my engagement party dinner. Instead, I turn my car on and keep driving in the opposite direction.

Not even crossing the border into New York deters me. I don't stop until I see signs advertising the oldest city in the country is approaching. I'm far from a history buff, so I'll take their word for it. It's a charming, small town. Others who drive along the main street I'm currently rolling along probably appreciate the quaintness. Me? I'm appreciating the fact that none of the faces walking past on the sidewalk have any idea who I am. It's rare I spend time among people who don't know anything about me. It's difficult to make different decisions when everyone around you is already expecting a certain one. Kind of like breaking out of a mold after you've already been shaped to fill it. Fitting into a different one can feel not only wrong—but also impossible.

I keep driving until I come to a bed and breakfast with a vacancy sign. For a Wednesday evening in late May, it takes a surprisingly long time. I park along the quiet, tree-lined street and unload Scout, along with our belongings.

As I walk up to the steps and across the porch dotted with rocking chairs, it occurs to me this may not be a dog-friendly establishment. The only trip I've taken since becoming a dog mom was a trip to the Amalfi Coast with William last summer, and my parents reluctantly took him. I've never traveled with a pet before.

But the elderly woman doesn't look twice at Scout as he follows me across the threshold into what looks to have originally been a living room and now is occupied by a large desk meant to greet visitors.

"Good evening, dear," the woman greets. "I'm May. You looking for a spot to stay?"

"Yes, I am," I reply, taken aback by her casual, friendly manner toward a complete stranger. City life has hardened me to such pleasantries. I was planning to ask about pets, but she clearly saw Scout and isn't saying anything, so I opt not to.

"How many nights?"

"Uh, just the one, please."

"On your way elsewhere?"

"Sure, I guess you could say that," I respond.

"All right." I hand her my credit card, and she returns it with a room key. "Have a wonderful stay. Both of you." She glances down at Scout and smiles.

“Thanks.” I gather up the luggage again and start up the stairs just past the desk. Scout follows, happy to be out of the car and have a building filled with fresh scents to sniff.

The door my key unlocks reveals a room filled with what looks like antique store cast-offs. It’s most definitely not my personal taste, which veers more toward the minimalistic, but it appears clean. Also, a large part of this impromptu stop was wanting to disappear someplace different for once. This most definitely qualifies.

I feed Scout his dinner and set up his bed in the corner, grateful for my over-prepared nature. I packed enough for a week for both of us for what was only meant to be a day trip. The hallway is empty when I emerge from my room, and there’s no sign of anyone as I pass down the stairs either. There’s no one at the desk, so I step outside, onto the front porch. Immediately, I spot the same woman who checked me in. She’s seated in one of the rocking chairs, conversing with an older man who appears to be about the same age. They’re chatting happily, but both quiet when the door shuts behind me, announcing my presence to them.

“Hello, dear,” May says, giving me a friendly smile.

“Hi again,” I reply.

“This here is my husband, Ed.” May waves an arm to the side in a scattered indication of the man seated next to her.

“Nice to meet you,” I tell him. He smiles in response.

“I’m looking for some dinner. Do you have any recommendations?” I ask.

May’s eyes light up. I get the sense she’s the type of person who thrives on helping others and making them happy. If I were the same, I’d be seated in a bistro where entrees cost the same as I’m paying to sleep here tonight. “Of course! Are you looking for one of those touristy places?” The way she delivers “touristy places” makes it clear what my answer should be.

“Not necessarily. Wherever you recommend,” I respond tactfully.

“You should head to the tavern down on Elm Street. Two blocks down then to the left. Best burgers in town,” Ed informs me.

May nods her agreement.

I’m not sure I’ve ever eaten at a tavern, but I nod as though it’s a regular occurrence. “Great, I’ll head there. Thank you.”

I make my way down the front steps and then begin walking along the sidewalk in the direction of the main downtown. Essentially three blocks of

businesses. I glance back once before I turn the corner. Ed and May are still seated side by side in their rocking chairs, talking happily. They're two strangers to me, ones who undoubtedly have challenges and complications in their own lives, and yet they seem completely content. Sitting next to one another and just talking at the end of the day. I try to think of a single time when William and I have done that. I come up blank. One—or both—of us is always doing something. A work assignment, reading the news, on our phones. Even the trips we've taken have been filled with guided tours and tastings. Not moments of companionable silence or deep conversation. I used to think that was a sign of a healthy relationship: how we're always on the same page and rarely need to discuss anything. Now, I'm not so sure.

The tavern May and Ed recommended is easy to locate. It's also certainly not what one would describe as a "touristy place." Situated between a barber and an old bookstore, the exterior reminds me of Ryder's truck. Others may call it ancient or neglected but looking at the building gives me the same sense of hidden care and history. There are fresh flowers in the window boxes, and the white paint on the doors appears to have been newly applied. Unfortunately, the touches only emphasize the grimy gray stone the building is built from and the cigarette butts littering the sidewalk.

A thin wisp of smoke rises from a still-lit stick as I pull open the white door. Either its owner failed to fully stamp it out or didn't bother to at all. Looking around the raucous groups packing the high-top tables, either scenario seems equally likely. I squeeze past and around patrons dressed in flannels and thick work boots, despite the spring temperatures. The air is cooler in here, with the damp undertone of a basement but without the muskiness that often accompanies it. Instead, the scent of pine cleaner, fried food, and cigarette smoke swirls about. It sounds appalling, but I don't mind it.

I plop down on an empty barstool, studying the framed items displayed behind the counter with interest. It seems to be a mix of old sports paraphernalia, aged photographs, and ancient newspaper articles faded to yellow. I may have grown up in a small town, but not *this* kind of small town. One with quirky charm rather than carefully curated allure. A stained, but originally white rag slides down varnished wood and stops in front of me.

"What can I get ya?"

I follow the calloused fingers up a flannel-wearing arm to meet the gaze of a man I'd guess to be in his mid-fifties. His hair is just beginning to veer toward more gray than brown, but his hazel eyes are still sharp and assessing.

"I'm not sure yet. Could I have a menu, please?" I request.

"Don't have one." The rag starts moving again.

"You don't have a menu?"

"Need me to repeat myself?"

So much for the friendly small-town stereotype.

"Nope. I'll just have a…" Ed's earlier words come back to me. "… burger, please."

The man nods once, looking marginally more friendly. "Drink?"

"Um…" If they don't have a food menu, I'm certain they won't have a cocktail one. "Beer, I guess?"

Another nod. "Bottle or tap?"

"Whatever you recommend," I reply.

This time there's no nod, just a brief, discerning glance. "All right."

"A lighter one, though?" I request. The last time I had beer was in college, and the Guinness I tried then has played a large role in why I have yet to try more of the brewed beverage.

This time, I get a lip quirk. "Sure thing." He ambles away, only to return seconds later with a pint glass. It's filled with amber-colored liquid and topped with a thin layer of white foam.

"Thank you," I tell him.

"You don't look like you're from around here," the man observes rather than walk off again. He leans against the counter and watches me take a sip of my beer. It's not terrible. His sage, easy manner reminds me a little of Joe, who left Fernwood four years ago to retire closer to his grandchildren.

"I'm not."

He keeps eyeing me, sensing there's more to the story the same way Joe always seemed to. I sigh, giving in to his silent, blatant curiosity. "I'm from Boston." I let some of my native accent saturate the city's name. *Baw-ston*.

"Ah." The man nods, as though the revelation explains everything about my appearance and manner. I guess maybe it does. "What brings you across the border?"

The beer sloshes close to the rim as I swirl the brewed alcohol in the glass. "I was trying to find some closure, I guess?"

“And did you?” he inquires. I’m certain he already knows the answer. I’m not exactly radiating an aura of peace and contentment. I should have just said I’m here antique shopping and couldn’t find the right color of rug to explain away any melancholy.

“Not exactly. There was someone I came to see, and I didn’t get to. Couldn’t.”

He hums an acknowledgment. “You changed your mind?”

“No, there were… other factors. I didn’t have any choice in the matter.” Even with a stranger I’m certain I’ll never see again, I feel the same compulsion to guard my weaknesses. To ensure the way I portray myself to the world is calm, cool, and collected. Not admitting I might not be over a guy I barely dated seven years ago. Especially now that I have a legitimate reason to genuinely believe what I’ve always secretly suspected—that he may not have actually committed the horrific crime he’s spent close to a decade supposedly atoning for.

“Closure is something we give ourselves, Boston girl.”

“I tried that,” I reply. “I tried that for a long time.”

“Did you want to forget?”

“Find closure? Yes. Forget? No.”

“We never forget anything. Just choose how to remember it,” he replies.

“You spouting more philosophical crap, Earl?” A tall, husky man with a shaggy beard takes the stool beside me. “No wonder they’re practically printing bills over at Tommy’s. People come to the bar for a cold beer, not a lecture on the meaning of life.”

Earl shakes his head, but there’s a small smile tugging the corners of his mouth that signifies a clear fondness for the new arrival.

“Usual, Jack?”

“Please,” the man responds.

Earl shuffles further down the bar top, and Jack turns to me. He’s younger than I assumed based on his clothes and voice. Beneath the thick beard is skin free from wrinkles, aside from a few creases around his brown eyes. From squinting, or smiling, or both.

“I’m Jack.” He holds out a calloused palm for me to shake.

“Elle.” I shake it.

“No wonder Earl was tossing out advice. Don’t have many ladies who look like you coming through here.” I shift uncomfortably, worried he’s about to start hitting on me. I’m not wearing my engagement ring. I told

myself it was because wearing a piece of jewelry worth six figures to a prison was an idiotic move. I know the real reason is I wanted to see how Ryder acted toward me without any visible sign I've moved on with my life.

"Just looked like a nice place to stop for the night," I reply, taking a sip of beer and hoping he'll take the sign I'm not interested in talking. "Break from the city."

"Oh, we get plenty of city folk. Just none who look so sad to be here."

"Oh." I drop the syllable so hard it seems like it should splash some beer in my face.

"Bad trip so far?"

"You could say that."

"Guy trouble?"

I snort. "Yes, but not how you're thinking."

"I forgot to ask. Did you want that burger for here or to go, miss?" Earl butts in. I glance up at him. This seems like a place you come to experience eating here. I'm surprised they even offer take-out. But Earl is glancing between Jack and me, and I'm pretty sure they actually don't. He's trying to protect me from any unwanted attention or prying, and despite his unsolicited advice before, it's sweet.

"To go, please." I take the offered out. "It was a long day of driving."

Earl nods, although we both know the trip here from Boston is barely over four hours. Earl walks off, presumably to fetch my burger, and Jack continues chatting away. He seems to have also understood the hidden meaning in Earl's question, because he doesn't ask me anymore questions, just chats about his nephew's upcoming baseball game. He's friendly and easy to talk to, but even if I wasn't engaged, I know he's never the type of guy I'd date. I tend to stay true to my first impressions of people.

"One burger." Earl reappears, setting a Styrofoam carry-out container in front of me.

"Thank you." I've barely touched my beer so far, but it seems rude to leave it. I take a long gulp. Then another. And another. Until the glass is empty. Rather than look offended by my clear attempt at a hasty departure, both Earl and Jack appear impressed. "Have a good night."

They both repeat the pleasantry, but don't say anything else in farewell as I grab the Styrofoam box and head toward the door. I grew more accustomed to the aromas inside the tavern than I realized, because the cool

night air I’m greeted by smells almost bland. Fresh and clean, but absent an indication of anything else.

I set off along the street, passing high school students, young families, and middle-aged couples. No other floundering women in their mid-twenties. Ironically, I know it appears as though I have my life completely together. I have a prominent piece of real estate in the heart of one of the busiest, most desirable cities, I have two degrees from Ivy League institutions that ensure I can essentially have my pick of high-paying career, and I have a fiancé just as wealthy and well-educated. Far more than most people my age.

I’d love to blame Ryder James for the sudden feeling of being adrift. He’s definitely a part of the cause. The one person I was willing to shake up my life for. But I know a larger piece of it is my life isn’t just plans any longer.

I’m not eventually going to marry a guy with a similar background to me. I’m currently engaged to him.

I’m not eventually going to work at my father’s firm. I’ve graduated law school and have a written offer from Washington and Stevens.

My life is falling perfectly into place, and rather than feeling satisfied, I’m battling the urge to smash it all apart.

Because I think that *would* feel satisfying.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Well, good morning," Paige answers.

"Hey," I respond, mouthing a *thank you* at the barista as I grab my iced latte and head for the door of the coffee shop. I woke up early and packed immediately, beating May to the front desk to check out. Buying caffeine still feels slightly illicit, even after living on my own for years. It's a fitting way to end my time in this tiny town I was never meant to visit and will never return to. "How are you?" I add, as I emerge outside. Despite the early hour, it already feels warmer here than it did yesterday.

"Fantastic. I'm on my way to Pilates and hoping the guy in my bed is gone by the time I get home, so I don't have to break it to him I never want to see him again."

"You left a strange man alone in your apartment?" I ask as I set the coffee and muffin on the roof of my car to unlock the doors. I'm not really surprised, but I infuse my voice with the scolding tone of a mother.

"Uh, yes?"

"What if he steals something?"

"Then I'll buy a replacement. This guy is not the type. Trust me. Not a lot going on upstairs. Or downstairs, for that matter. He was pretty to look at, though."

I laugh as I settle in the driver's seat and turn on the car so I can start driving. "That's terrible."

"Whatever. Not all of us have handsome lawyers panting after us."

I sober at her mention of William. "There are plenty of great guys out there."

“Uh-huh, sure. If you say so. Hang on.” There’s some distant talking in the background, and then she returns to the line. “Sorry. Had to tell the driver where to go. So… what’s up?”

I drum my fingers on the steering wheel, inhaling deeply. “Do you know where Kennedy Jacobs is living now?”

“Kennedy Jacobs? From high school?” It’s hard to get Paige’s usual light-hearted tone to shift much, but that question definitely did the trick.

I nod, then remember she can’t see me at the moment. “Yes,” I confirm.

Paige’s voice is more serious than I’ve heard it sound in years. “Why?”

“I want—need—to talk to her.” I clear my throat, then take a sip of coffee.

“About?”

“You know what about,” I whisper.

“Is this because William proposed? Some sort of closure? Because—”

“Wait. How do you know William proposed?” I interrupt.

“It’s all over social media. His parents posted a photo of you two. I *thought* that was why my best friend was calling me. Congrats, by the way.”

“Thanks.” I let that word of gratitude sit for a minute. These aren’t two conversations I wanted to combine. “Do you know where she is?”

Paige sighs, giving me the distinct impression she brought up William on purpose. Also that she may have just come to the same conclusion I unwittingly did yesterday: that Ryder James still has a serious hold on me. Strong enough that mention of the guy I’ve been dating for the past three years and just got engaged to isn’t much of a deterrent. A tighter grip than mere curiosity about an unresolved past. “Yeah,” she finally answers. “Kinsley’s kept in touch with her. I have her address from a card she sent when my dad died last year.”

I’m surprised this is the first I’m hearing about it, but then reconsider. Not many topics are off-limits between Paige and me, but Ryder James has been one of them for the past seven years. Until now.

“Is she still in Massachusetts?”

“Yes.”

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. I’m not sure what I would have done if Kennedy had moved farther away. “Can you send it to me?”

The town where Kennedy Jacobs is now living is in the center of the state. Meaning I have an hour and a half to contemplate what I'm going to say to her. I haven't seen or spoken to Kennedy since the night of Homecoming. I'm not sure what I would have said if I had, but I never even had the option to. My parents sent me back to boarding school the very next day. A thoughtful interpretation of the action would be to say they wanted to spare me any unwelcome attention. A realistic read of the situation is they wanted to minimize theirs.

The address Paige gave me belongs to a tiny bungalow on a secluded street. The route my navigation system put me on didn't take me through any sort of downtown area, so I have no idea how large of a town I'm in. There are a couple of cars parked along the street and a teenage girl walking a golden retriever along the sidewalk, but that's it for any signs of activity. Scout barks when he sees the other dog, and I shush him before climbing out of the driver's seat. I walked Scout when I stopped for gas a half hour ago, so I leave him in the car as I lock the doors and glance around.

"Elle? Elle Clarke?"

My gaze flies to the garage tucked up alongside the house. Kennedy Jacobs is rounding the corner, holding a yellow watering can and wearing a shocked expression.

"Hi, Kennedy." I give her a small wave, trying to rapidly assess the situation. She doesn't *look* angry to see me. Just stunned. But I'm wary of what might be waiting under that surprise based on our shared past.

Kennedy sets the watering can down on the edge of the flowerbed she was clearly preparing to water. It immediately tips, splashing the geraniums with a hefty douse of water, but Kennedy doesn't seem to notice. Or care. She stumbles down the driveway toward me. I don't move, simply shifting on the sidewalk. Paige gave me her number along with her address. I could have called, texted, given her some indication I was coming. Now I'm stuck watching her near and wondering what I should do or say. What she's going to do or say.

She reaches me. Rather than tossing any questions my way—like asking me what the hell I'm doing here—she gives me a hug. I freeze, not expecting it. It takes me a few seconds to raise my arms and squeeze her back.

"Wow, it's so good to see you, Elle."

I don’t correct her use of my old nickname or inform her I go by Eleanor now. Or say anything at all.

“Come on in,” Kennedy tells me, gesturing toward the house. I follow her up faded blue front steps, pausing behind her as she opens the front door. She pulls the screen open for me, and I walk inside, glancing around curiously. It’s small, neat, and tidy.

“Take a seat,” Kennedy instructs. “Let me just go wash my hands from the garden. Would you like some tea?”

“Um, sure,” I reply. “Thanks.”

She heads into the kitchen, leaving me to study the living room. There’s not much to scrutinize. The exposed floorboards are shiny; the walls are painted a soothing shade of eggshell. There’s a couple of framed prints on the walls, but they’re otherwise bare. A vase of peonies sits in the exact center of the coffee table, with a few magazines stacked next to it. I pick a gardening one up and page through it until Kennedy reappears, holding two glasses of iced tea.

“Thanks,” I say when she hands me one.

“It’s mint,” she replies. “From my garden.”

I take a sip. “It’s good.” There’s a pause. “Your house is beautiful,” I add.

“Thanks. It was a steal. Real estate’s expensive around here. We renovated most of it ourselves.”

“We?” I catch.

“My husband and me. We’ll be married two years this September.”

“Oh, wow. Congratulations.”

“Thanks. Are you seeing anyone?”

A chat about our respective relationship statuses is not the conversation topic I had in mind, but I go along with it. “Uh, yes. I’m engaged, actually.”

“How exciting!”

“Yeah.” I take a gulp of tea. It’s very minty. “It is.”

“Are you getting married soon?”

“Next summer. We both just graduated law school. It makes more sense to get settled in our careers first.”

“Of course. You always were one to think things through,” Kennedy replies, smiling. There’s no bite hidden beneath the words; they’re just matter of fact.

I shift uncomfortably. “You seem… happy.”

Her smile dims a little. “Yeah. I am.”

I stare down at the golden-colored tea for a moment, watching the cubes of ice bob along the surface of it. “I got a call a couple days ago from a nonprofit. They’re… looking into an old case. A… rape case. Ryder’s case.” I hesitate for a few seconds before glancing up.

Kennedy doesn’t look shocked. Or upset. “Until Proven Guilty?”

“Yes,” I reply, surprised.

Kennedy looks away from me, out the window that overlooks her impressive garden. “You can let trauma define you,” Kennedy states. “Or you can define it. It wasn’t until I met Jacob—my husband—that I realized just how much I’d been letting that one night define me. Let it become *the* thing that defined me. I tried everything I could think of not to let it. But by doing so I let it consume me anyway. How I dressed. Where I went. Who I talked to.”

“I—I can’t even imagine,” I say softly. “I’m so sorry, Kennedy. I never even—I was so wrapped up in…” I let my voice trail off. We both know exactly what—who—I was consumed by.

“We were kids. It’s not something anyone should have to deal with. But we were just kids.”

“Yeah,” I finally reply. “We were.” And it’s defined both of our lives ever since, in different ways.

“I tried to pretend it never happened. Repress everything. It worked for a few years. But then I started having these dreams…” Kennedy shudders. “And it was always a blond guy above me.”

Shock surges through me. “Blond?”

“Yes.” Her smile is sad.

“You’re sure?”

“My therapist had me do this exercise… I was unconscious for part of that night, but before…” Another shudder. “Yes. I’m sure.”

He didn’t do it. The certainty of that races through me, erasing years of doubt and dismay. You only need to glance at the news one morning, one day of the year to know that human beings are capable of horrifying, repulsive actions. We all have the capacity to inflict harm on others. Some of us are more susceptible to it than others. I blanketed Ryder and that night in denial because I knew if I looked closely there would probably be more to the story. It’s a relief and a nightmare to know that actually *is* the case. Because there wasn’t anything I could have done either way.

“I didn’t want to think about any of it again after it happened. I thought it was over. I never thought they’d convict someone who was innocent. I mean, he pled guilty. I never thought—”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I told the lawyers I’d do anything. Testimony, interview, whatever it takes to get him out.”

“You were the one who contacted Until Proven Guilty,” I realize.

Kennedy nods. “They said they thought there was a chance. But it’s been almost a year.”

I nod. “Appeals can take a long time. Have they told you anything?”

“Not in months. But they reached out to you, didn’t they? That’s a good sign, right?”

“Maybe.” I try to recall my call with Lily Sampson to gauge the tone of it. Unsuccessfully. Everything after she said Ryder’s name is a blur. I can’t recall anything she said, much less the emotion behind it.

“Do—do you know who it was?” I ask quietly. Because if it wasn’t the guy convicted of the crime, it’s one who got off with it scot-free.

Kennedy swallows a couple of times. “I’m pretty sure it was Liam.”

“Liam *Hathaway*?” I’m stunned.

She nods rapidly three times. “It’s the only thing that makes sense. I remember talking to him earlier, drinking with him. He told the police he walked in on Ryder… on me. It must have been the opposite.”

Those details are news to me, but I keep that to myself. “That doesn’t make sense, though. Why would Ryder go along with that? Protect Liam?”

Kennedy shrugs helplessly. “I don’t know.”

“Did you tell the lawyers?”

“Yes. There’s… not much to go on. Even if there was, he’s been living overseas for the past few years. They said that complicates things more.”

The front door opens. “Kennedy?” A man’s voice calls out.

“Living room,” she calls back.

A tall, broad-shouldered man enters the room. “Oh. I didn’t realize we had company.”

“Hi.” I smile. “I’m Ele—Elle.”

“Elle and I went to high school together,” Kennedy supplies.

“Nice to meet you, Elle. I’m Jacob.”

“Nice to meet you as well,” I reply. “You have a beautiful home. Kennedy said you’ve done most of the renovations yourselves?”

The man beams at the mention of his construction prowess. “Yup. Just the guest bath left and then it will be finished.”

“Impressive,” I compliment.

“Eh, it’s mostly been trial and error,” Jacob replies. “But the house is still standing, so…” He gives a what-are-you-going-to-do shrug. I smile. “Hey, Ken, I was talking to Sophia at work, and she said they’d like to take a look at the terrace house after all. I said I thought you’d be free after lunch, but—” he glances at me “—I can ask her if…”

“I’ve got to get going anyway.” I polish off the rest of my tea and stand.

“You don’t need to go,” Kennedy protests.

“I have to get back to the city,” I reply. “Really. Don’t rearrange any plans on my account.”

“Okay. Well, let me walk you out, at least.”

“Sure,” I respond. “Bye, Jacob.”

“Bye, Elle,” he calls back.

I follow Kennedy to the front door and back outside. We’re both silent as we cross her front lawn and reach my car. Scout starts barking as soon as he sees me, and I shush him.

“I’m glad you’re happy, Kennedy. Your life here—well it seems pretty great.” I smile as I fiddle with my keys, and she returns it.

“Are *you* happy, Elle?”

“Yeah. My life is… well, I don’t have anything to complain about. I never have, I guess.” I let out a dry laugh. “I just—well—that phone call was kind of a curveball.”

“Have you talked to Ryder?”

“No. Not since that night.”

Kennedy gives me a sad smile. “When did you get engaged?”

“Three days ago,” I admit.

“So… crappy timing?”

I give her a wry smile. “The crappiest,” I acknowledge. “It’s been seven years. It’s stupid. It shouldn’t matter if he’s guilty or innocent.” I shoot her a horrified look, realizing what I’ve just inadvertently implied. “I mean, of course it *matters*. I want whoever hurt you to pay for what he did. Whoever he is. But if Ryder didn’t do it… well, it turns out that still matters to me.”

Kennedy nods slowly. “You’re still in love with him.”

“No.” My tone is emphatic. “I never—I wasn’t…” I take a deep breath. “It’s just—there was never any resolution between us. He was just… gone.

I left. No closure.” I shake my head, trying to clear the heaviness lingering in the air. “Forget it.” I step forward and give her a hug. “It was really great to see you.”

“You, too,” Kennedy replies as I open the door and climb into the driver’s seat.

“I’ll send you a wedding invitation.” I smile, trying to lighten the mood.

Kennedy smirks. “I’ll come. *If* there’s a wedding.”

“What do you mean, if?”

The girl who used to copy my every motion and outfit is entirely absent as Kennedy raises both of her eyebrows in a clear challenge. “I mean I’ve been the third person in a Ryder and Elle love triangle, and it doesn’t end very well for the person not named Ryder or Elle.”

I scoff. “I’ve moved on.”

“Just don’t run into something else because you’re running from him,” Kennedy advises. “It will catch up to you. Feelings always catch up to you.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE

It takes me over a week to muster the courage to call Lily Sampson back. She answers on the first ring.

"Lily Sampson."

"Hi, Ms. Sampson. This is Eleanor Clarke. We spoke last week?"

"Oh. Yes." Her tone has changed. It's wary now. If I had to guess, I'd say she's recalling how I hung up on her. "I remember."

"I'm sorry for ending our call so abruptly and taking so long to call you back. I—something came up."

"That's quite all right."

"You were calling about Ryder James before?" I prompt.

"Right. Yes." She sounds flustered all of a sudden.

"You said there was something I could help with?"

"I did, but that's no longer necessary. I'm sorry to have bothered you. Now—"

"No longer necessary? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. We have all the information we need."

"So… you have a strong case?" I fish, recalling how Kennedy said she hasn't heard any news in months. Probably a bad sign.

"I'm afraid I can't discuss the details of a client's case, Ms. Clarke."

"I'm an attorney. I just graduated. I'd be happy to volunteer—"

"Mr. James has been released, Ms. Clarke. There's no longer anything to be done."

I stare at my kitchen like it's the first time I'm seeing the marble countertops. "Released?" I echo. "He's… out?"

“That’s what I just said.” There’s a touch of impatience in her voice, along with something else I can’t fully distinguish. “Now, I’m afraid I’m late for a meeting. Have a good day.”

She hangs up before I can say anything else, leaving me with the devastation of the bomb she just dropped.

Released. Ryder is no longer in prison.

Still dazed, I grab my keys, and head outside. I’m halfway to Fernwood before I realize I don’t even have my phone. I don’t turn around. Don’t let my foot up off the accelerator until I’m turning up the dirt road that leads to the trailer park and reach the only one I’m familiar with. I trace a path I know well up to the front door and bang on it a few times. No answer.

“No one’s home.”

I turn to see an old man leaning back in a lawn chair that’s perched below the overhang of the neighboring trailer. A thick cloud of smoke surrounds him, and I have to smother the urge to cough as I approach him.

“Are you sure?”

“Watched them all leave this morning, and no one’s been back since,” he confirms, taking another pull of his pipe.

“Them?”

“Kat and her two boys.”

My heart starts racing. “Two? You’re sure there were two boys?”

“My eyes haven’t left me yet, girl. Especially when I’ve got these.” He taps the rim of the thick glasses he’s wearing with the lit pipe. I’m a little worried he’s going to set what’s left of his hair on fire.

“Do you know where the boys went?”

“Christopher takes care of the landscaping round the wealthy parts of town. Other boy’s just back from the big house. He’s at the garage, if I had to guess. That’s where he used to spend most of his time.”

“Thank you,” I tell him fervently. I guess it would have occurred to me to check Bob’s garage eventually, but I likely would have sat around here for an hour first.

He waves away my thanks. “That’s one thing I’m still good for.”

I climb back into my car and set off for the garage. My anxiety level rises with each turn of the tires. The short drive feels twice as long as the trip to Fernwood did. Anticipation transforms each second into hours. There’s not going to be a guarded entrance separating us this time.

The garage is bustling when I arrive. With customers, employees, and cars. I park on the very periphery of the parking lot.

“Be right with you, miss,” one guy tells me as he rushes by.

He’s gone before I have a chance to tell him I don’t need any automotive assistance. I wander along the side of the building, peeking inside each bay as I do. There are mechanics in every one, but none with a familiar figure. I linger and peer at each one anyway. It’s been seven years. He could look completely different. I reach bay six and following a careful examination of each person inside I’m certain none of the men are Ryder. I turn to head back to the office. Maybe Bob is working and can tell me where he is. If he’s even here. Maybe the old man was wrong.

I spin around to retrace the path I just walked.

And there he is.

Ryder doesn’t look surprised to see me. Which surprises *me*. I came here to see him, and I’m still taken aback by his sudden appearance.

Instead of startled, Ryder looks withdrawn.

Resigned.

But he also stares and stares at me, not saying a word.

I’m doing the same, categorizing every visible change the same way I did the first day of senior year. Except this time, it hasn’t been two years since I last saw him. It’s been seven. And the worst part is it doesn’t feel like it. It doesn’t look like it. My fears I wouldn’t recognize him were completely unfounded.

Studying that messy brown hair and meeting those forest green eyes, I feel like no time has passed at all. Like it’s only been a matter of weeks since I came here for the first time, hoping to see him.

I feel like I should be hugging him. Kissing him. I wonder if that’s evident on my face because there’s a flash of something besides total indifference.

“Why?” I ask. Because that’s all I need to know. Because I’ve waited seven years to voice that solitary word.

Any emotion drains away like his face has become a sieve. “It doesn’t matter.” The words are dead. Empty. Detached. As though I’m not referring to an event that altered both of our lives drastically.

“Doesn’t matter?” I compensate for his lack of emotion by sounding near-hysterical. “Are you fucking kidding me, Ryder?” It’s been a long time

since I swore—out loud, at least—and it feels good. “How can it not matter?”

“Because it doesn’t,” he bites out.

“Of course it does! You went to prison for seven years for something you didn’t do!”

“Yeah. *I* went. Not sure what that has to do with you.”

“Because you let me believe it was true!”

“I didn’t *let* you believe anything, Elle.”

“You pled guilty, Ryder! My parents shipped me off to boarding school the next day. What was I supposed to think? Why would you do that? Why would you choose to spend *seven* years someplace you didn’t belong?”

“I’ve done plenty of illegal shit, Elle.”

“So wrongful imprisonment is some sort of penance?”

“What do you care?”

I stare at him, marveling over how I can be so confused and upset, yet also feel so at ease and familiar. How bickering with Ryder feels almost as good as kissing him used to. Then his question registers, and indignation swells.

“Because it doesn’t make any fucking sense! I need to know—”

“What do you need to know, Elle? Why do you need to know it?”

“Because—it—we—”

“Go back to your fiancé.”

I bite my bottom lip—hard, completely side-tracked. “Who told you?”

Ryder scoffs. “The massive ring on your finger.” There’s no pain or anger on his face, and the lack of those two emotions elicit both in me. “When’s the wedding?”

“Next summer,” I manage.

“You graduated law school already. So you’re spending a year getting settled at Daddy’s firm first, handling some meaningless mergers? He works there too, right?”

“How did you…”

Ryder lets out an ugly laugh. “It’s how your life was always going to end up, Elle.”

“Not always,” I snap, and for the first time I break through his mask. There’s a flash of—something—but it’s gone before I can tell what.

“I’ve got to get back to work.” He turns, heading back toward the garage’s office.

“I went to see you,” I call out after him. Ryder stops and spins back around. “They wouldn’t let me in because I wasn’t an approved visitor.”

“Good. That wasn’t any place you should have been. Or seen.”

“You never thought I might want to see you?”

“Nope,” he lies, starting to leave again.

I play my trump card, calling his bluff. “Then why was I on your unapproved visitor list? The *only* name on that list?”

Ryder stills. “Who told you that?”

“The sweet woman behind the bulletproof glass.” He doesn’t say anything, just looks at me, managing to maintain an impressive poker face. Another thing that hasn’t changed. “Why, Ryder? Why was I the one person?”

“I wasn’t taking any chances,” he finally says, then turns to head back to the garage for the third time during this conversation.

I clearly can’t take a hint. “You owe me answers, Ryder.”

He spins back around. “I don’t owe you shit, Elle. Come back around here, and I’ll get a restraining order.”

Ryder starts walking again, and I don’t say anything to try to stop his departure.

For the first time in seven years, I’m close to tears.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I’ve just pulled away from the curb outside my house when my phone rings. I make the risky choice of tapping the green button on the steering wheel to connect the call without checking to see who is calling me first.

“Hello?” I answer.

“Elle. Hi.”

“Hi, Tommy.”

“You busy?”

“Not really. Just driving.”

“To the cottage?” A touch of nervousness enters his voice.

“Yes…” Did Eliza not tell him she changed the location of her bachelorette party? Am I supposed to tell him we’re not going to Vegas after all?

There’s commotion on the other end of the line, then absolute silence. “That’s where I was planning on having my bachelor party,” Tommy tells me.

“Um, okay? Do you want me to try to talk Eliza out of it? She’s only changing the location last-minute so Jess can still come since she can’t fly anymore.”

There’s a long pause. “I invited Ryder,” Tommy finally says. “Both this weekend… and to be in the wedding.”

My heart leaps; my stomach drops.

Now I’m the silent one. “Oh,” I finally manage to expel a sound. “Does —does he know I’ll be there this weekend?”

“No,” Tommy admits. “You weren’t going to be. At the time.”

“He’s not going to be expecting me to have any involvement in your wedding, Tommy.” I wouldn’t—if not for the fact he’s marrying one of my best friends. There’s no way Ryder will be anticipating that after a seven-year absence. I’ve never asked Tommy about whether he visited or spoke to Ryder during that duration of time, but if he did, I’m certain he wouldn’t have brought me up.

“I know,” Tommy states. There’s a sigh saturated with dread. “I’ll tell him.”

“I went to the garage,” I admit. “As soon as I heard he was released.”

“I’m guessing it didn’t go well?”

“Yeah, you could say that.” I huff out an unamused laugh.

“He… it’s…” Tommy gives up. “You need to just let him go, Elle.”

“Yeah, I got that message loud and clear. It would be easier if he’d just tell me *why*, though.”

“He’s not going to,” Tommy replies.

“Yup, he said that, too.” Suspicion dawns. “Wait, did he tell you?”

“Why he didn’t fight it? No. That he saw you? Yes.”

“Guessing he put it a lot less pleasant than that,” I mutter, and Tommy laughs.

“You did just show up at the garage.”

“I happened to be in town.” I choose not to share the fact I went to Fernwood just to see him. I’m pretty sure Tommy already knows. “And I… needed to.”

“Have fun this weekend, Elle. Don’t let Eliza do anything crazy.” Tommy’s obviously unwilling to discuss Ryder with me anymore, and I can’t say I blame him. The lines blurred in Ryder’s absence, largely thanks to his relationship with Eliza, but he was Ryder’s best friend long before the two of us had ever spoken. His loyalties are clear.

“You won’t be going to the cottage?” Stupid, annoying disappointment saturates my voice.

“I’m guessing… not,” Tommy replies tactfully. Ryder’s lucky to have him as a friend.

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” I respond dryly. “Bye, Tommy.”

“Bye, Elle.”

The remainder of the trip passes quickly. It takes me another hour to reach the small seaside town where Eliza’s family’s cottage is located. It’s charming and picturesque, pretty much the polar opposite of the bustling

city I just left behind. I roll my windows all the way down, letting the salt breeze whip through my hair. I exhale and inhale deeply as the sparkling water of the sea appears on my right.

I pull into the clamshell driveway, parking behind Eliza's car. I climb out, grabbing my carry-on suitcase from the backseat of my sedan. Scout lets out a joyful bark when I unlock the crate before leaping out to sniff around the hydrangea bushes. A seagull caws in the distance as I head toward the stairs leading up to the wraparound porch. Six rocking chairs move slightly in the summer breeze. I walk through the screen door that's already propped open and am greeted by chaos.

Eliza is standing on the coffee table in the center of the living room, wearing a sash that reads *Bride To Be* and waving her arms around. "No! Cooler on the back deck!" she calls out.

Then, she spots me. "Eleanor!" She jumps off her makeshift stage and runs over to me, giving me a massive hug as she rocks me back and forth. "Thank God you're here. I need some help keeping the boys in line."

That's when I realize there's not just the five other women in the bridal party here. There's a decidedly masculine back hauling the cooler out through the screened door onto the back deck.

"The boys?" I repeat.

"Yeah," Eliza rolls her eyes. "Tommy was already planning to have his boys' bash here, so I figured why not just combine things?"

"Why not?" I echo, looking around for Tommy. Does that mean he talked to Ryder? Is he seriously going to miss his best friend's bachelor party just to avoid me?

Scout skitters in through the doorway, finally figuring out I went inside.

Eliza glances down with a tentative expression as he gives her a dismissive sniff and then sits on my toes. "Oh. You brought Scout."

I roll my eyes. "I had to. William is working all weekend, and… well, you know." William is not a fan of Scout's, and the hatred is most certainly mutual.

"Come upstairs," Eliza demands, grabbing my suitcase and heading for the stairs. "I saved my maid of honor the best room." I follow her. I've been here before, but not since college. The whole house is decorated in relaxing shades of pastel, but I'm the furthest thing from calm. My mind is racing. I don't even know if Tommy has told Eliza about his history involving Ryder.

My guess is not. Which means she has absolutely no idea about *my* history with Ryder.

The room Eliza shows me to is gorgeous. It's on the third floor, with a private balcony that overlooks the beach.

"Wow. You sure you don't want this room?" I ask, only half-kidding.

"Nope. I snagged the master. Get changed out of those fancy clothes, and then come back downstairs. Paige is making margaritas!"

"Okay," I agree, smiling at her exuberance. Scout finishes sniffing around the room and promptly leaps onto the bed. Eliza rolls her eyes. "He's house-trained," I promise.

"If you say so. Hurry up. I've only met Tommy's high school friends a few times, and they've all been talking about how excited they are to see you."

That's news to me. I'm a tenuous, frayed string extending from the past. My acquaintance with Tommy's groomsmen—who I know are all former or current residents of Fernwood—is tied to Ryder. I figured I'd be an unwelcome reminder of what happened to their friend, not an anticipated arrival.

"Okay," is all I say again before Eliza rushes out into the hall.

I change out of the suit I wore to the office this morning into a gauzy blue sundress and pad back downstairs. I encounter Tommy at the bottom of the stairs.

"You're here," I state, eyebrows raised.

Tommy nods once, glancing around. No one is paying attention to our conversation. "He didn't answer any of my texts or calls. I guess he decided not to come. And Eliza was all excited about a joint thing already, so I figured why not?" The words are casual, but I can hear the hurt underneath.

"I'm sorry, Tommy," I tell him.

Tommy shrugs. "He's been through a lot."

"So have the rest of us," I reply, before I continue down the stairs.

"Hey!" Paige rushes over to me when I enter the kitchen. "What took you so long to get here?"

"Meeting ran late," I respond, accepting the glass she holds out and taking a sip. Potent.

"Imagine that." Paige rolls her eyes. "So, you're working at your dad's firm after all?"

I nod. “Just for the summer. While I prep for the bar and do other interviews. I’ll decide in the fall where I’m going to start work officially.”

“Eleanor! Hi!” Jessica waddles over to us, rubbing her swollen belly.

“Hi, Jess,” I greet, giving her a hug. “How are you feeling?”

“Badly. I can’t believe Eliza cancelled the trip to Vegas just for me! You all should have gone without me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Paige replies. “We can’t have a bachelorette party without the full bridal party.”

I nod in agreement. “This will be just as fun as Vegas.”

“Especially if Elle has more than one drink.” Paige smirks. “Drink up, dear.”

I roll my eyes at her but take another sip of the margarita. “How much alcohol did you put in this? It tastes like straight tequila.”

“Just balancing quality and quantity,” Paige replies, which I take to mean she took some liberties with the measuring. I won’t even need a second drink. I rarely have any alcohol. Two sips of this, and I already feel buzzed.

“I miss drinking,” Jessica says forlornly. “I need something to distract me from the fact I can no longer see my feet. Been hoping you’d call me for another favor, Eleanor.”

I gulp some more of my cocktail so I don’t have to say anything.

“Favor?” Paige asks.

“Eleanor needed me to look someone up for her pro bono case.”

“I didn’t know you were working on any pro bono cases,” Paige tells me, eyebrows raised.

“Probably because you tune out anything I say about work. There was just the one. It’s over now.” I emphasize the last three words.

Paige nods once. Yup, she’s put it together. She goes home more than I do, and I’m sure the whole town of Fernwood is buzzing about Ryder’s return.

Jessica misses our side conversation. “Oh no, it is?” she asks, sounding disappointed. “Did you guys win, at least?”

“Yup. We won. Excuse me guys, I need some water to wash down all this liquor.”

I fill a glass as I greet the rest of the bridal party, then move on to the guys. Eliza was right. They do seem excited to see me, asking questions about living in Boston and attending law school. The social hour melds into

evening as the sun sets above the sea, sending skitters of orange and pink sunbeams sparkling across the surface of the waves.

Everyone gravitates to the formal dining room for dinner. Eliza ordered take-out from a local restaurant, and there's a delicious array of food that's been transferred to ceramic serving dishes.

We're halfway through eating dinner when the front door opens, halting the amiable chatter. Thanks to the open floor plan, there's a clear line of sight to the entryway from the table.

"Hey, Tom—" Ryder appears in the foyer, spots me, and stops talking.

I hate how I'm not annoyed he's so late. Pissed he showed up at all. Nope, I'm experiencing a wave of excitement that he's here.

"What are you doing here?" Ryder asks, looking straight at me. Guess we're going antagonistic right out of the gate. Not that I'd expect anything less.

"Same thing as you would be my guess." I take a sip of margherita, just for something to do. Scout jolts to attention from his spot on the living room rug when I speak, racing over to the intruder.

"Scout. Leave it!" I call. But my dog's not listening. Or barking. Or jumping. He's wagging his tail and rubbing against Ryder's legs. "Scout!" He ignores me completely, too enthralled by encountering another human he likes. I grit my teeth. Of course it would be Ryder.

"Ryder! You made it!"

Tommy leaps up from the table in an overdone attempt to dismiss the tension and confusion swirling through the room. He bounds over to Ryder's side. Ryder stops petting Scout and says something to him that causes Tommy to shift uncomfortably. I'd bet my newly minted law degree it was about me. The rest of the men all head over to greet Ryder as well.

I can feel Eliza's eyes on me. Along with the rest of the women. Especially Paige's. And Jessica's. Guessing she's put together who the Ryder I called her about is. I keep my gaze focused on my linguine as I swirl strands of pasta around my fork.

Footsteps near the table.

"Hi, Eliza. It's nice to finally meet you," Ryder says. "I'm Ryder."

I finally look up. Eliza is glancing between the two of us, questions written all over her face. "Hi, Ryder. It's nice to meet you, too."

Ryder continues introducing himself around the table, even to Paige. He skips me entirely.

I drain my glass and grab the wine bottle, only to discover it's empty.

"I'm going to get more wine," I announce unnecessarily, grabbing my empty glass and heading into the kitchen. I set the glass down on the kitchen island and open the fridge to survey the chilled bottles. I grab a rosé and shut the stainless-steel door. Ryder is standing on the other side.

"Finally going to introduce yourself?" I snap, twisting the top off the wine and filling my glass with a generous helping.

"Did you come down with amnesia in addition to becoming an alcoholic?"

"Fuck you, Ryder." I can be confrontational, too.

"Rough day at the office?"

"Nope. I had a lovely day." I take a large gulp of wine. "Mostly because I was looking forward to this weekend with my friends. Which you just ruined."

"By not introducing myself to a girl I've known since I was fourteen?!"

"By showing up here!"

"At my best friend's bachelor party? I still don't know what the fuck *you're* doing here!"

I sigh deeply. "Eliza was my freshman year roommate. She visited me and Paige in Fernwood one summer. It's how she met Tommy."

Ryder shakes his head a couple of times before he rakes a hand through his hair and then walks over to the cabinet, pulling a plate out. I stalk out of the kitchen, bottle in one hand and glass in the other. Based on the awkward looks I'm getting, I'm pretty sure everyone overheard our kitchen conversation.

Ryder follows me out of the kitchen and fills his plate with food.

"So, Ryder. You grew up in Fernwood, too?" Eliza takes a stab at polite conversation.

"Yes." His tone isn't the unpleasant one I was met with in the kitchen, but it's not inviting, either.

"Did you like it?" Eliza tries again.

"It had its moments." Ryder doesn't elaborate on what those were—which of course makes me wonder if *I* was part of any of them.

I'm distracted from musing when the conversation shifts to me.

"How's the gala planning going, Eleanor?" Jessica asks, interrupting the silence that's fallen.

"Fine," I say quickly, hoping she'll drop the subject.

“Oh, yeah! That’s next weekend, right?” Eliza asks, jumping on board with the topic. I’d love to leap overboard.

“Right,” I confirm.

“What gala?” one of the groomsmen, Mike, asks.

“For the charity Eleanor started,” Eliza explains. “It helps women find long-term employment.”

“You started a charity?” This from Ryder. To me.

I take another sip of wine. “Yup. Don’t worry. My life is still meaningless.”

“I didn’t say your life was meaningless. Just part of your job.”

“Yeah, I heard you the first fucking time, Ryder.” I’m pretty certain I’ve never sworn in front of anyone at this table besides Ryder before, and wide eyes everywhere I look is proof of it.

“Why did you start it?”

I hold his gaze. “I wanted to.”

He nods, accepting the non-answer.

The conversation continues from there, seamlessly swerving away from me. I don’t contribute anything to the discussion on what activities should take place tomorrow. This trip is ruined for me. And more exciting than I ever could have anticipated. I’m worried that the spectacle that Ryder and I have caused has made that abundantly clear to everyone else here.

Because the real reason I started the charity?

Is sitting across from me.

Everyone disperses after dinner, most of us tired from a full day of work followed by the journey here. I know I am. I carry my plate to the sink, watching Ryder head for the porch with the rest of the men. Despite our disagreements at dinner, he seems relaxed now as he flashes Tommy a carefree grin in response to whatever he just said. I’m torn between petty relief he’s just as affected by our encounters as I am, and jealousy that that’s all I elicit. There wasn’t any casual camaraderie present when we were talking earlier.

The men disappear, and I shove my plate in the dishwasher next to the rest of the dirty dishes.

“Guessing there’s a story there?”

Eliza comes up beside me, studying me curiously as she rinses off a glass.

“Yeah,” I sigh. “There’s a story there.”

“He’s why Tommy acted so strange when I suggested combining things?”

“Yes,” I confirm. “He couldn’t reach Ryder. We assumed he wasn’t coming.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really. I’ve probably said enough tonight.” I cringe as I run through some of the comments I’ve made so far. Why couldn’t I have just smiled and ignored him? I know the answer. Because some small part of me —that I hoped was gone but clearly isn’t—has always craved Ryder’s attention over anyone else’s. His disinterest has always been my kryptonite.

“You’re different around him,” Eliza observes.

“I know. Meaner.” I stick my own glass in the dishwasher and wash my hands.

She laughs. “That’s not what I was going to say. But, yeah. A little.” She pauses. “Not in a bad way, though.”

“Can someone be mean in a good way?”

Eliza shrugs. “Mean means you care.”

I don’t deny it. “I’m trying not to,” I confess.

“Seems to be going well,” Eliza comments.

I flick some water at her, and she laughs. “I don’t think I’ve ever even heard you swear.”

“What are you two discussing?” Paige comes up behind us, and I shut down like an overheated computer. Discussing Ryder with Eliza is one thing. She never knew me pre- or during Ryder. Only after. Paige knows exactly how invested I was. Has a sense of just how snarled my feelings for him truly are. *Not* something I want to discuss now.

“Nothing,” I respond, hoping Eliza will follow my lead. “I’m going for a walk down to the water.” I head for the sliding door that leads out onto the back deck, only stopping to snag the half-full bottle of wine from the kitchen counter.

Scout’s asleep on the living room rug, so I leave him be, heading out into the darkness solo. I cross the wooden boards of the deck and descend the stairs that lead right onto the beach. I stumble out into the sand. Not

because I’m drunk, although I’m getting there, but because I can barely see a few feet ahead of me. The closer I get to the ocean, the brighter it becomes. Moonlight reflects off the waves pounding the sandy shore.

I plop down atop the millions of grains, planting the bottle of wine upright beside me. I’m a pool person. I like the predictability and the cleanliness of a constrained body of water. Where you can see through the clear water and hear the gurgle of its contents being filtered. But staring at a pool is nothing like staring at the ocean. It’s like observing an animal in the zoo versus in the wild. You can see the benefits: the controlled environment, the increased level of safety, the ability to bring the habitat to you versus having to travel to seek it out.

Benefits don’t outweigh experience. Can’t compete with the raw, overwhelming devastation of the wild.

A pool is calming. Enjoyable. The ocean is formidable. Staggering.

Salty waves pound the sand, churning in foamy swirls visible even in the limited moonlight. The horizon is invisible, providing the impression the water in front of me stretches endlessly. That it’s infinite. Fathomless.

“Contemplating a swim?”

I startle at the sound of his voice, then scoff. “Nope.”

Feelings froth inside me the same way as the foam in front of me as Ryder takes a seat in the sand beside me. He doesn’t sound combative right now, and it has the horrifying effect of not eliciting any negative emotions in me for the first time since he burst back into my life. I feel… giddy. Unsteady. Swamped with the shaky sensation of being around someone whose opinion really, really matters to you.

“So, the supermarket job? That was you.”

I manage a nod in response, although it wasn’t really a question. He’s simply acknowledging a fact.

“She likes it. Seems… stable.”

“Good.” Ryder’s family obviously didn’t give him any indication of the role I’ve played in their lives during his absence. I won’t be the one to fill him in. I can see it going poorly for a number of reasons.

Ryder doesn’t make any further attempt at conversation, and I stay silent as well. I don’t know what to say to him. How to act around him. His refusal to clear the air when it comes to our past is maddening. It leaves me in a constant state of uncertainty because I can’t begin to sort through my emotions for him with so many puzzle pieces missing.

Stubbornness has always been a strength of Ryder's. If he doesn't want to tell me what really happened that night; he won't. And he's the only one who can tell me the real reason he played the role he did.

He was right at the garage. What happened that night affected his life a lot more than it did mine. Lingering curiosity is one thing, but I know my motivation is a lot stronger. Maybe he does, too.

I take a swig of wine, just for something to do. Sitting in the sand next to Ryder in silence feels intimate. Meaningful. Confusing.

He grabs the bottle when I set it back down. I think he's going to try some, but instead, he studies the label in the light being cast by the moon.

"This looks like an awfully nice wine to be chugging by yourself. From the bottle."

"I'm not by myself," I retort. "And I know it's a nice bottle. I brought it for Tommy and Eliza as a gift."

Ryder snorts. "Thoughtful."

"What'd you bring from the prison gift shop?" I snap. And immediately regret the words. "Sorry," I say grudgingly. "That was rude." And mean.

I thought acting like a hormonal teenager was just an unfortunate side effect of seeing him again for the first time. This evening is strongly suggesting that's not the case. My control keeps slipping, and it terrifies me. I'm concerned he'll see how much I care. Worried about how much I care.

Ryder catches the panic that must be apparent on my face. He gives me a wry, mocking smile. "It's fine. I already know you aren't perfect, *Eleanor*."

Then he stands and starts walking back toward the house, leaving me sitting there staring at the sea.

Wondering if he still thinks I'm imperfectly so.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Scout is nowhere to be seen when I wake up. I sit up in bed, suddenly wide awake despite the fog of alcohol lingering in my brain. One glance at the alarm clock tells me it's an hour later than he normally wakes me up for his morning walk.

"Scout!"

He's not on the bedroom floor. I jump out of bed and race down the hall.

"Scout!"

I rush down the stairs and across the living room, calling out for him again. My heart pounds from more than the exertion. He's never been here before. What if someone left the door open and he wandered outside? He could be…

"What are you yelling about?" Paige calls from the kitchen.

I hurry over to the doorway. "Scout's missing. I must have forgotten to close my bedroom door last night, and he's nowhere in the house."

"He's outside. With Ryder," Eliza replies.

"He's what?" Slowly, I register the entirety of the bridal party—with the exception of me—is leaning against the far kitchen counter, sipping coffee and staring outside.

I walk forward. The outlook from the window that stretches the length of the counter above the sink provides a perfect view of a shirtless Ryder playing fetch in the sand with *my* dog.

"Unbelievable," I mutter.

"Let them play. Scout looks like he's having fun," Paige tells me.

I pour myself a mug of coffee. "Yup. I'm sure you're *real* invested in Scout's happiness."

Paige smirks at my sarcasm. “Maybe I would be if he liked me half as much as he likes Ryder.”

Eliza shoves away from the counter and heads for the fridge. “Anyone hungry?”

“Me! I’ll scramble some eggs.” Jessica joins her at the kitchen island.

I take the open spot by the sink, watching Scout race back and forth with a tennis ball firmly clutched between his teeth.

“Should I grab a mop?” I ask Paige when I glance over to see she’s studying the scene outside just as intently.

“What? Why?” She finally looks away from Ryder.

“To clean up your drool.”

Paige rolls her eyes. “Like *you’re* immune.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“So?” she challenges. “It’s not like he’s gotten uglier.” She glances behind us, then lowers her voice. “You knew. That’s why you went to see Kennedy.”

“I didn’t know he was about to be released. I knew there was a chance he might be,” I reply honestly. “Kennedy made it clear he should be. That he shouldn’t be there.”

Paige eyes me over the rim of her mug. “Did she tell you it was Liam?”

Shock ripples through me. “Yes. She told *you* that?”

Paige shrugs. “I called her a couple days after you went there. I was curious. We had a long talk. She seems to be doing well.”

“Yeah, she does,” I agree. “But Liam… I mean, it just doesn’t make sense.”

“Makes a lot more sense than Ryder ever did. Liam would act different when you weren’t around. A short temper and a massive ego never pair well together.”

“I guess,” I respond. I saw glimpses of some troubling traits in Liam, but I never thought he’d be capable of assaulting someone. “But Ryder taking the fall for him makes no sense. They didn’t even get along.”

Paige snorts. “‘Didn’t get along’? The only things Liam ever seemed to care about were you and football. Ryder took both. Of the two of them, Liam was the one with money and connections. Is it really a surprise Ryder took the fall?”

“You think Liam set him up somehow?”

“No idea. Maybe you should ask Ryder.”

I eye Paige, noting her smirk. “Yeah, great idea,” I reply dryly.

“Anyone want bacon?” Eliza calls out.

“Me! I’ll fry some up,” Paige offers, effectively ending our heavy conversation.

I turn my gaze back outside just in time to watch Ryder start for the wooden stairs that lead up to the back deck, as everyone besides me makes themselves busy in the kitchen. Tommy appears, along with a few of the other guys, fresh from a morning run. Scout bounds into the kitchen a minute later, sandy and euphoric.

“You stole my dog,” I accuse Ryder when he steps into the kitchen right behind the canine in question.

“Borrowed,” he corrects breezily as he fills a glass with water. He’s put his shirt back on—thankfully—but he still looks damn good clothed, as Paige pointed out.

“Borrowed implies you asked permission beforehand.”

“Stealing implies I didn’t return him. He’s right there.” Ryder nods to where Scout’s passed out at my feet.

Our morning routine normally involves a walk around the block. Endless rounds of fetch with Ryder seem to have knocked him out cold. Scout barely even stirs when bacon starts sizzling on the stovetop.

“Since when do you even like dogs?” Ryder asks me.

“I’ve always liked dogs,” I reply.

He raises one disbelieving eyebrow. “You wouldn’t even pet Spot.”

I startle at his reference to the stray that used to hang around his trailer. “That’s not true! Plus, I brought him food.”

“Yeah. To impress *me*. That wasn’t for the dog’s sake.”

Another spark of shock at his casual tone. His easy acknowledgment of how desperate I was to fit into his life. “That’s awfully presumptuous of you.”

“Yeah, well. That’s me. *Presumptuous*.”

I’m entirely unprepared for the devastating grin that accompanies the words. I take another sip of coffee. It seems like I always need to have a beverage in hand when conversing with Ryder. To have something to do. To keep from saying something I’ll regret. To recover from something he said.

“Breakfast is ready!” Eliza announces, playing the role of hostess.

Rather than move into the dining room, everyone merely gathers around the kitchen island to scarf down the hot eggs and bacon.

“It’s a perfect day to go kayaking,” Tommy tells us all. “I’m planning to head out after breakfast.”

Others chime in with their interest, but I don’t say anything. There’s a pile of work I should be tackling today. Weekends off aren’t a luxury I usually have. At least, not now that I’ve officially started summer work at my father’s firm. I had other options—I still have other options—but capitulating on the summer was my attempt to make amends after the engagement party mess.

I head upstairs to change out of my pajamas, and then settle on the sunporch with my laptop. Paige finds me before I’ve even opened it.

“Uh, no. You’re not doing any work.”

“I have to!” I protest.

“Because your dad’s going to fire you?” She rolls her eyes. “Are you actually required to work weekends?”

“Well, no,” I admit. “But—”

“Up!” Paige tugs me to my feet before I can follow the command myself. “You put a bathing suit on earlier, right?” She eyes my jean shorts and t-shirt like she’s suddenly developed x-ray vision.

“Yes.”

“Great. We’re going kayaking.”

“Why do I need a suit to go kayaking?”

“In case you capsize.” Paige shoots me a *Duh* look as she drags me out onto the deck and down the stairs. We pass Scout, who’s fast asleep on the rug, exhausted from his morning exercise.

Tommy, Eliza, Mike, and Ryder are standing and talking on the beach. The rest of the bridal party and groomsmen are relaxing in the lounge chairs that rest on the deck.

“Why can’t we sunbathe instead?” I ask, nodding up the rest of the group. The gathering that doesn’t include Ryder.

“Because we can do that in Boston,” Paige replies.

I can’t really argue with that logic, so I don’t say anything as we join the four other figures on the sand. The three guys all head inside the shed nestled amongst the seagrass, saving me from making any immediate conversation.

The ocean doesn’t appear all that fierce today. Waves trickle up the shore, then slowly retreat. Simply stroking the sand. There’s no sign of white-tipped waves, just an endless spread of glittering turquoise. Sunshine

beats down brilliantly, bathing everything in warmth and erasing any shadows. The scent of coconuts wafts along in the salt-tinged air as Eliza and Paige apply sunscreen.

"Want some?" Eliza holds the tube out to me, distracting me from taking in the picturesque view.

"Yeah, thanks." I take the bottle from her and smooth some of the lotion on my skin.

"So, we've got three tandems, or we could take some singles out…"

Tommy exits the shed, glancing around our group uncomfortably. There's six of us. Three men; three women. The sexist yet obvious choice is we should pair up by gender. But those pairings could be problematic. Aside from Tommy and Eliza traveling together, the couplings aren't obvious.

"I can take my own out," I say.

If it doesn't involve Pilates or dancing, I know Paige is pretty unmotivated athletically. I haven't seen Mike in seven years. The ocean may look calm now, but I know that can rapidly change. I'm not inclined to put my life in his hands, either.

"Do you even know how to kayak?" the companion I didn't even consider asks.

"I don't think it's all that complicated, Ryder," I retort. "You just paddle along."

"Have you ever been in a boat that wasn't being steered by someone else?"

"I don't see how that's relevant." I haven't.

"Right. Because experience *never* matters."

"Not in a glorified rowboat. I'm perfectly capable of paddling!"

Mike opens his mouth, glances at Ryder, and closes it again. I'm guessing Tommy is probably regretting inviting the rest of us along. I doubt this is the romantic ocean outing he imagined for himself and Eliza.

"Let's get the boats out," Tommy suggests. "Then we can figure out… logistics."

The boys disappear inside the small shed again.

"Do you want to go with Tommy?" Eliza offers. "I can—"

"No, not necessary," I interrupt. "I'm fine going by myself. Really. If I get lost at sea, hopefully I'll just drown and won't have to listen to Ryder say, 'I told you so.'"

Paige rolls her eyes. “Yeah. That’s definitely the best-case scenario.”

Ryder, Tommy, and Mike reappear, each pulling a brightly colored kayak behind them. A bit of my bravado wavers as I study the boats. They’re bigger than I expected. I hope the single ones are smaller.

“Should I get out one of the singles?” Tommy asks.

“No, it’s fine. Eleanor and I can go together,” Paige offers.

I raise both eyebrows, hoping she can tell under my hat and sunglasses. Either she can or she knows me well enough to sense my uncertainty. “I’ll actually paddle,” she promises.

“Or I’m happy to go with you,” Mike offers. “I’ve kayaked plenty of times before. Mostly on a lake, but…”

“For fuck’s sake,” Ryder mutters, dragging the tandem kayak closest to us into the edge of the water. “Just get in the damn boat, Elle.”

The implication is clear. He’s planning to be my fellow passenger.

“How do I know you’re not going to capsize us?”

“Because I can paddle a boat without tipping it over?”

I scoff.

“Just trust me, Elle.”

“I do trust you,” I surprise myself—and him—by saying. “It’s the ocean I don’t trust.” But they’re unerringly similar, I realize. Both captivating, consuming, unpredictable forces. In my eyes, at least.

“I’ve seen you do crazier shit than go kayaking on a calm, quiet day,” Ryder challenges.

“Yeah. It worked out great for me,” I inform him dryly. But I climb into the kayak anyway. Ryder does the same, shoving away from the sandy shore as soon as he’s tucked his tall frame inside the plastic one of the boat.

Our companions scramble to keep up with our sudden departure.

Ryder was right. He can absolutely paddle a kayak without tipping it over. And he can do it pretty damn fast. We’re further from the shore and closer to the horizon in a shorter stretch of time than I would have thought possible.

A glance back confirms Eliza, Tommy, Paige, and Mike are following us, but that they’re also a ways behind.

“Is this a race no one told me about?” I ask pointedly.

“Nah. I’m just compensating for your lack of paddling.”

Yeah… I haven’t pulled my paddle out of the space between my legs since I climbed inside. I yank it out of the small confines, almost giving

myself a bloody nose in the process. I start dipping the paddle in the water rushing by, but we're moving at a fast enough clip I'm more hindering than helping. I can't manage to pull it out before Ryder's propelled us a few feet further along the water, and the brief drag of my paddle slides us back a few inches. I don't make more than ten strokes before Ryder points my lack of progress out.

"You're not helping."

"I know."

I keep paddling for another twenty feet just to make it clear I'm not giving up because he said something, and then pull the wet paddle back on board. Cold water droplets add dark spots on my shorts. The only sound is Ryder's paddling and the splash of the waves acquiescing as the kayak is propelled through them.

"I'm surprised you came," I tell him.

"Tommy's my best friend."

"Social events never seemed like your thing." He doesn't respond. "I guess the ones we attended together never went very well."

I'm pretty sure Ryder mutters "understatement" under his breath, but I can't tell for sure over the sound of the waves splashing and wind soughing.

"I went to see Kennedy Jacobs a few weeks ago."

No response, and I turn in my seat so I can see his face. That same jaw muscle is flexing and relaxing. Yeah, he heard me.

"Not only did she tell me you weren't the one who assaulted her, she told me Liam was the one who did."

Still twitching, maybe a hair faster now.

"Which means not only did you go to jail for something you didn't do; you let a rapist carry on with his life as though nothing ever happened. And I know it's not because you were trying to protect Liam. Did he threaten you? Bribe you?"

Ryder stops paddling. It takes me a few seconds to realize that's the equivalent of him walking away. Since we're in a small boat and actually doing so would be physically impossible. I'm still turned toward him, so I watch as the other two red kayaks grow closer and closer to us. He thinks I won't keep talking about this once they reach us. And he's right. This weekend is about Eliza, not about my messy past with her fiancé's best friend. Regardless of the fact that our past predates their own relationship.

They're not close enough to hear what we're saying yet, though, so I press ahead.

"Kennedy told me she is the one who contacted Until Proven Guilty. You weren't even trying to fix things. To get out."

Ryder surprises me by actually responding. "Why did you go see her?"

"What?"

"Kennedy. Why did you go see her? After all these years?"

"A woman from Until Proven Guilty called me. Said they were working on your case. I went to try and see you. We both know how that went," I add pointedly. Ryder doesn't look the least bit repentant. "So, I went to see Kennedy."

"Lily shouldn't have called you."

"Lily?" I catch. "You're friends with your lawyer?"

"Who I spend time with is none of your business."

Shock ripples through me, faster than the water churning around us. "More than friends, then." My voice doesn't betray any of the surprise I'm experiencing, and Ryder doesn't respond.

"Jeez, James. I didn't think we were ever going to catch up with you guys," Mike comments as he and Paige paddle up beside our kayak. I spin back around so I'm facing forward again. I'm sick of looking at Ryder's stoic expression, and tired of making sure my own isn't betraying anything I don't want it to.

"You good?" Paige glances over at me as the front of their kayak draws even with ours.

"Yup," I respond, tracing some of the water droplets streaking down the side of the plastic boat.

"Whew! You guys were setting quite the pace," Eliza comments as she and Tommy arrive on the scene. "You can barely see the beach from here."

I twist around, being careful not to look at Ryder. Eliza's right, the horizon behind us looks almost identical to the one before us. Only the upright frames of houses are an indication of which direction we came from.

"We should probably turn back," Tommy adds.

Everyone agrees, and the five other people I'm with set about turning around. I don't make any attempt to retrieve my paddle, not even pretending as though I'm a participant. I stare out at the water and think about how much I wish I'd stayed on that sunporch.

Because every time Ryder refuses to talk about our past it makes me want to dig it up even more.

After lunch, I retreat to the sunporch again. No one bothers me this time. Except for Scout, who abandons the comfy living room rug in favor of curling up on the floorboards by my feet.

I'm halfway through writing a brief when my phone rings.

"Eleanor Clarke."

"Good afternoon, Ms. Clarke. This is Andrea Thompson. I'm a partner at Gray and Ellington." A partner. I got the job. They would make an associate handle rejections. "I'm thrilled to offer…" I tune her out as she starts to delve into details, waiting for the excitement I thought would accompany this moment. Learning I got the job I thought I wanted. Was told I should want. By professors, classmates, peers, summer employers… by William. By my father. Just like when William proposed, this moment doesn't feel the way I envisioned it would.

Is that because reality never lives up to fantasy?

Or because being told you should want something doesn't make you want it?

There's a pause on the other end of the line, and I realize I'm supposed to say something in response.

"Thank you," I state. "Uh—how long do I have to make a decision on whether or not I'm accepting the position?"

Another pause. Not a question she was expecting, I'm sure. This is the position you leverage others to get, not the one you leverage.

"Uh… I'm not—" Andrea clears her throat. "We'd like a decision as soon as possible, but I'll have to confirm whether there's a specific date."

"Okay. Could you have someone let me know if there is one?" My voice is cool and detached, and I'm not making it sound as such. That's simply how I'm feeling at this exact moment.

"Yes, of course," Andrea replies. "Have a good evening, Ms. Clarke. Congratulations. Working here is a coveted opportunity."

That final sentence makes me smile, not that she can see it. I've yet to meet a lawyer who hasn't mastered the art of making pointed comments.

“Yes, I’m aware. Have a good night as well.”

I hang up first, studying the half-written brief open on my computer. Rather than keep working on it, I open the web browser and pull up Until Proven Guilty’s website. Their staff is all listed. I click on Lily Sampson’s name. There’s a short biography describing where she received her undergraduate and law degrees, as well as her work experience. She’s only two years older than me. I’m also annoyed to learn she’s a smiley blonde, according to the small photograph included alongside the paragraph.

“Who’s Lily… Sampson?” Paige’s voice suddenly says to my immediate right, and I jump, before slamming my laptop shut.

“No one,” I reply hastily, shoving the papers I spread out on the couch back into their folders.

Paige raises both eyebrows. “Oh-kay. I came to grab you for dinner.”

“Great.” I finish cleaning up the papers I’ve littered about and stand up, stretching.

Paige’s still eyeing me, but she doesn’t say anything as we head into the kitchen.

“Did I hear you on the phone earlier?” Eliza asks when we enter.

“Yeah,” I reply, spreading cheese on one of the crackers set out as an appetizer on the kitchen island.

“Work call?” Paige asks, rolling her eyes as she pours wine into glasses.

“Yeah,” I respond. Hopefully that’s what she’ll surmise the online research was related to. “Job offer, actually.”

“From that big fancy firm you were waiting to hear from?”

“Uh-huh,” I reply, accepting the glass of wine she hands me.

“Woohoo! Cheers!” She clangs her glass against mine.

The guys enter the kitchen, shifting the conversation to a discussion on how to prepare the fish they caught. I swallow some disgust with another sip of wine as they pull out the fleshy, slimy meat. I’ve never gotten over my aversion to seafood.

Grilling is settled on as the cooking method, and we all end up out on the deck as Tommy fires up the grill. The sun is just starting to dip below the horizon, bathing everything in sight in soft, golden light. I watch the color infiltrate my wine glass as Tommy and Mike argue over which temperature to cook the fish at.

They must settle on one, because they both join the rest of us at the slatted table a couple minutes later.

“Congratulations on the job offer, Elle!” Tommy tells me. Eliza must have mentioned it to him. “The firm’s a really big deal, right?”

“Yeah, it is. Thanks,” I reply.

Ryder snorts, and I leap at the chance to challenge the passive aggressiveness that’s wafting off him. On the first sign of the lack of enthusiasm I’m experiencing in someone else.

“Do you have a problem with me getting a job at one of the largest, most prestigious law firms in the world, Ryder?”

“Nope,” he says breezily. “The millionaires they represent will be lucky to have you helping to line their pockets.”

There’s no easy chatter around the table anymore. Once again, we’re the car crash that no one can look away from.

I know I should drop it. But Ryder has always elicited the raw type of response uncharacteristic of the poise that’s usually effortless for me. Indignation wells, and I let it spill out.

“I graduated at the top of my class from the highest-ranked law school in the country *so* I could get a job like this! What do you want me to do? Work at a non-profit like *Lily*?”

“Jealous, Clarke?” Ryder mocks.

I’m engaged, as he already knows, and I should say so. Instead, I say something infinitely worse. “Of spending time with Lily? Not particularly.”

My heart races, because suddenly it really matters how he replies.

“Of her spending time with me,” Ryder says quietly, holding my gaze the whole time.

I’m dangerously close to crying. I set myself up for it because I didn’t think he would follow through. I thought that he was over the past. Mirroring a conversation we had seven years ago is pretty much the opposite of that. Memories and moments tangle and twist between us in an invisible string of connection until I veer off script.

“You made certain I don’t have any say in who you spend time with, Ryder.” I stand. “Excuse me, I have to make a phone call.”

Without another word, I stride toward the stairs that lead down to the beach. Salty air smacks me in the face, and I breathe deeply, trying to center myself. I’m fine. Everything’s fine. I’m letting a guy I haven’t seen in seven years dictate my happiness.

The job offer I got earlier is with a firm large and prestigious enough my father will accept I’m not working for him. The starting salary is

ridiculous. I'll have a big office, a secretary, and all the resources one could want. It's the culmination of years—decades—of work.

I didn't dream of being a corporate attorney when I was little. I knew my parents would push me to go to law school after college. But part of why I loved being with Ryder so much was that I didn't—couldn't—focus on anything else when I was with him. Graduating law school and embarking on a career felt awfully distant then. Now, it's on top of me.

Have I let my parents influence my choices? Absolutely.

Am I proud of my accomplishments? Also yes. I've worked hard to get where I am.

I take a seat in the sand, pulling my phone out. I tap on William's name, and it starts ringing. And ringing. Just when I think it's sending me to voicemail, he answers.

"Hey, Eleanor."

"Are you all right?" I ask. "You sound exhausted."

"Yeah." He yawns. "Just having a long day at the office. Was here until 2 AM and came in at 6."

"You probably should have just slept there," I reply.

He laughs. "Yeah, probably. Figured I'd try to maintain some semblance of a work life balance. Seems to be a futile effort with you out of town."

"You should leave on time tonight," I tell him.

"Yeah, I will," he replies, although we both know he won't. "How's the girls weekend going?"

"It's fun." I try to inject some enthusiasm in my voice. "I went kayaking earlier."

"That's hard to imagine." William chuckles.

"Why?" I reply, well aware there's an edge to my voice.

William doesn't hear it. "I just don't think of you and water sports."

"It was fun," I state, as I look out at the sunset over the sparkling saltwater. Orange and pink have joined the streaks of golden.

"Well, I'm glad you enjoyed it." He yawns again.

"I heard back from Gray and Ellington today."

"You did?!" There's a pause, where I'm obviously meant to fill in the outcome.

"Yeah, I got it."

"Eleanor! That's amazing! You're coming back Sunday, right? I'll make reservations so we can celebrate." There's no indecision in William's voice.

No wavering on whether I should take the job. Just enthusiasm and encouragement.

“Yes, Sunday,” I confirm.

“Congratulations, babe. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks,” I reply.

“Uh-oh, one of the partners is headed this way. I’d better get back to work. I’ll see you Sunday, okay?”

“Okay,” I respond.

“Love you.”

“You, too.” He hangs up.

I drop my phone from my ear, half-wishing I could throw it in the sea. It’s ironic I ended up living in one of the busiest cities in the country. Most of the time I wish I was someplace exactly like this with fresh air and the ability to hear yourself think. Without any distractions or obligations. Another thing I let my parents decide for me.

One deep inhale later, I head back up the deck. Happy chatter fills the air now, rather than the tense silence I left. The other change is the appearance of food. The fish has been cooked, and there’s also a spread of the salad, rice, and roasted veggies Eliza prepared earlier.

“Everything good?” Eliza asks as I return to my seat.

I nod, keeping my gaze on my glass of wine. “Just checking in with William.”

“He excited about the job?”

“Yeah,” I reply. “He is.”

Too bad his excitement didn’t have a fraction of the effect Ryder’s disapproval did. Not only because I apparently weigh the two men’s opinions differently. But because if I’m being truly honest with myself, I know Ryder’s opinion aligns much more closely with my own unfiltered one. I embarked on this path simply because it is what’s expected of me. I never expected how unfulfilling it might be. How knowing you’re going to end up someplace is different than actually arriving there.

Eliza lets the topic drop. The rest of the meal is spent rehashing the day’s activities and discussing all that is to come the rest of the summer. Specifically, Eliza and Tommy’s wedding.

Ryder’s silent through dinner. I overcompensate for his silence by chiming in on every topic. Thanks to my maid of honor status, I’m very well-versed regarding each aspect of the wedding. I also feel like I’ve

contributed to shredding the relaxing peace that was meant to characterize this weekend. No time like the present to make some amends.

Everyone trickles back into the house slowly following the conclusion of the meal. I slip away in the opposite direction. Alcohol-less this time. I settle in the same spot in the sand I called William from, tucking my knees against my chest. The sun's almost completely gone, taking its warmth with it.

I don't know how long I've been sitting here before another figure drops down beside me.

"I'm sorry," Ryder tells me.

Rather than accept or acknowledge his apology, I ask him "Do you ever wish you could go back to being a different version of yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

"I used to like myself better, I think."

"You're the same person, Elle."

"No, I became the person I thought I was supposed to be."

"Far as I can tell you're just as stubborn and fiery as ever." A small smile graces my lips. Because I'm absolutely, completely certain no one else would choose those two adjectives to describe me. "Is this about that fancy job? Because I didn't—"

"It's not about the job," I cut in. "Well, not just about the job," I amend. "I just feel like I stopped making my own choices. I've never been in a boat that wasn't being steered by someone else, like you said earlier."

"That wasn't meant to be a deep metaphor, Elle. I *literally* meant you'd never steered a boat."

"Yeah, well, it's true. *Literally* and metaphorically."

"So, grab a paddle."

I shoot him a glower, and Ryder smirks. "Oh, now are you done with the lame analogy?"

"You make it sound easy."

He lifts the can of beer he's holding from the beach's shore. Clumps of damp sand fall onto the navy board shorts he's wearing. "You're an adult. It *is* easy. Making your own decisions is supposed to be part of the gig."

"I made them. I just said some obligatory yeses too."

"So change them to no's."

"That will be… difficult," I admit.

"Aren't designer heels returnable?"

I choke on an unexpected laugh. It’s a reminder I don’t need of why Ryder James used to be the focal point of my world. Because I’m not just insanely attracted to his appearance. I’m also drawn to his dry wit. His unswerving confidence in who he is has always made me feel focused as well.

He’s still my favorite person to talk to.

“They are,” I reply. “But I don’t think custom-made engagement rings or law degrees are.”

Ryder doesn’t say anything. I was already looking out at the waves, but I don’t allow myself so much as a side glance as I let those words linger in the air. My guess is Ryder had some idea this topic of conversation means my discontentment runs deep. I’m not sure if he expected it to extend to my career and engagement.

“So, what’s *your* plan?” I ask. I’m trying to distract him. I’m also genuinely interested.

“My plan?”

“Yeah.”

“For my life?”

“No, for the rest of the night.” I look at him and roll my eyes, letting plenty of sarcasm seep into my voice.

“I’m not sure yet.”

“Yeah, you are,” I counter.

Green eyes flick to my face and away. “I thought I might need to stay in Fernwood. That Mom and Chris would need me. They put on a good front when they visited, but I thought it was probably just that—a front. But Chris is doing well at school. And Mom—well she’ll never leave. But at least she’s stable. So… I started looking into options.”

“Options?” I echo.

“Guy I know has a construction business up north. Offered me a full-time gig.”

“North?”

“Someplace in Maine.”

“What about your job at the garage? Doesn’t Bob need you?”

Ryder shakes his head. “Taking me back was a favor. Practically charity. He’s got a full-time crew already.”

“So you're moving,” I state the words emotionlessly, but I feel anything but.

“Probably.”

Neither of us say anything after that. Unlike last night, I stand first. Ryder mirrors me, and we head back for the beach house side by side.

When he does speak, it’s not a topic I’m expecting.

“So you like fish now, huh?” Ryder asks as we weave through the waving beach grass to the stairs that lead up to the back deck.

I don’t need to look at him to know he’s grinning. I can hear the smile in his voice. “Uh-huh,” I respond, in what an impartial party would probably *not* call a convincing tone.

“Scales don’t bother you? Or the little bones? Or the slime—”

I punch him in the arm as we climb the stairs. My knuckles smart from the contact with solid muscle.

“Stop it!” I cringe. “I was trying to be polite.”

“The disgusted look on your face was super polite.”

“I couldn’t help it! It tasted terrible.”

Ryder just grins.

“I’m surprised you remember…” I admit, a little tentatively. Our track record of parting comments isn’t great. I’m worried my honesty might continue the streak.

“You’re a hard person to forget, Elle Clarke,” Ryder informs me. His smile is gone, but the humor hasn’t left his face.

“I’m sure you gave it a good effort,” I reply, trying to ignore the way his words imprint on my brain.

Ryder seems to appreciate my attempt to keep the conversation light-hearted. “Yeah, I did.”

“You’re tough to forget, too,” I admit, possibly ruining it.

“Did you try to?” His tone is light, the words anything but.

“Yes. No… not really,” I acknowledge as we pause outside the sliding doors that lead inside. I didn’t talk about Ryder. Doesn’t mean I didn’t think about him.

“Can I take Scout out tomorrow morning?” He lets my wavering slide, and I’m grateful.

“You’re asking my permission?”

“I thought that was a requirement to play with your dog.”

“I was surprised this morning. Scout doesn’t like many people,” I explain.

“Are you suggesting I’m not likable?” There’s a teasing glint in his green eyes.

“No. I know exactly how likable you are,” I reply. I seem incapable of lying to Ryder.

We reach the French doors and head inside. Tommy, Eliza, and Paige are all lounging in the living room. Which has a clear view out onto the back deck. I hope they weren’t watching us just now. Scout leaps up and runs over to me, nuzzling his wet nose against my bare legs.

“Hey, buddy,” I crouch down. He rolls over showing his belly, panting happily as I take the hint and rub the soft fur. “Ready for bed?” Scout barks.

“I’d be that excited too, if I was a dog who gets to sleep in a human bed,” Paige comments. She found out Scout usually sleeps next to me when he leapt on top of her when she stayed over a few months ago after having too much wine.

“Who’s the best boy?” I croon, in the voice I know drives her crazy. Mostly because she’s told me so multiple times. Scout’s tail thumps against the floor.

“I’m headed to bed,” Ryder says. I glance up to see he’s already looking down at me, an amused but mostly inscrutable expression on his face. “Night, Elle.”

“Night, Ryder,” I respond.

He disappears upstairs after saying good night to everyone else. I head into the kitchen to grab some water.

Paige appears in the kitchen as I’m filling a glass.

“You’re in trouble,” she tells me as she sets her wine glass in the sink. Guess that answers whether *she* was watching us, at least.

Unlike the last time she told me that, I don’t argue.

Because don’t I know it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

There's no drooling over a shirtless Ryder from afar the following morning. He's already standing in the kitchen, Scout panting at his feet when I enter the room.

I approach him to fill a mug with steaming coffee from the pot he's standing next to.

"Morning."

"Morning," he repeats.

"Looks like you two had a busy morning?" I nod toward my exhausted dog.

"Yup. He should be nice and tired for your drive back."

"An hour's nothing. I brought him all the way to Pennfield."

He doesn't say anything, but Ryder's knuckles lose any color as he grips his mug.

"What's the fight about?" I ask. Our silence has exacerbated Tommy and Eliza's loud voices on the opposite side of the kitchen.

"What to cook for breakfast, I believe."

"Should have guessed."

"It's a common source of controversy."

I nod toward Eliza and Tommy. "I thought that might be us one day."

"Arguing about breakfast foods?" he replies dryly.

"Engaged." Obviously, I'm a masochist.

There's a long stretch of silence, and I'm pretty sure I've pissed him off for the I've-lost-count-how-many-th time. We're all departing shortly. I'll see him at the wedding, but that's not for another month. This might be my last chance to talk to him.

“It’s how I would have proposed.”

“What?” The single word isn’t enough to convey the shock I’m feeling. The counter’s the only thing keeping me steady and upright. That was pretty much the last thing I was expecting him to say in response to my blunt admission.

Ryder picks up the coffee pot and keeps his gaze on the steady stream of caffeine entering his mug as he refills it. “With breakfast food. Joe told me if I gave you blueberry scones, you’d say yes to just about anything.”

I don’t say anything. I can’t. I’m drowning in a deluge of emotions.

The knowledge Ryder considered our future to any extent is overwhelming.

That he talked to Joe about it is heartbreaking.

But most concerning?

If I could choose between breakfast in bed and a proposal in front of my parents and half the wait staff at Boston’s most exclusive restaurant—the proposal I accepted—I would choose blueberry scones.

“Ryder!” Tommy calls.

Ryder shoves off the counter and heads over to the island without another word.

Maybe he senses my turmoil.

Maybe he thought that revelation wouldn’t matter to me.

Either way, he misses how I have to turn away to hide the solitary tear sliding down my cheek.

Everyone prepares to leave shortly after breakfast. None of us linger for long, all having various commitments and work tomorrow. Plus, we all know we’ll see each other again at the wedding.

I give all the girls hugs. Then Tommy gives me one as well. I work my way through the guys, until I reach the last one.

Ryder and I stare at each other.

We’ve talked, both pleasantly and angrily. Teased. But we haven’t really touched.

He shrugs and I swallow, both of us trying to act like we’re not aware everyone else is surreptitiously watching us. We step forward

simultaneously, meeting in the middle. Ryder loops his arms around my waist, tugging my body flush with his. I go willingly, tucking my head underneath his chin as I wind my hands around his back. Even through the cotton of his t-shirt, I can feel ripples of musculature. I inhale deeply, filling my lungs with his scent. Even in the salt air, he still smells the same as I remember. Like cedar and mint and clean laundry.

I exhale, and step away. His arms drop. Neither of us say anything. I pick up Scout and set him in the backseat of the sedan, shooing him inside the crate I brought but never used.

“Bye, everyone.” I wave, then quickly turn away to slide into the driver’s seat. I turn on the car and start driving immediately, worried I’ll find a reason to stay longer if I think about it for too long.

The drive back to the city is a long one. It takes closer to two hours than the one it’s meant to, thanks to heavy traffic. Obviously, I wasn’t the only one who opted to flee the busy, sticky city for the weekend in favor of a sea breeze.

My brownstone feels too quiet and empty after the hustle and bustle of being in a house with almost a dozen other people. I get Scout settled, change into a dressier outfit, and head into the office to tackle some of the work I neglected during my weekend get-away.

The office is bustling when I arrive, just like I knew it would be. William jumps up from his cubicle when I enter the floor reserved for summer associates.

“Eleanor! I thought you wouldn’t be back until later!”

Since we’re at work, he just gives me a hug of greeting. I try not to compare it to Ryder’s. And fail.

“I wanted to beat the traffic. Didn’t do much good, unfortunately. Plus, Paige hardly let me do any work there. Figured I could catch up on some stuff before we head to dinner.”

“I don’t think Gray and Ellington is going to revoke their offer because you slacked for a weekend, Eleanor.” William grins, crinkling the corners of his brown eyes.

“More worried about my father,” I respond, and his smile turns knowing. He can certainly relate. “What time did you make the reservations for?”

“Seven.”

“Okay, perfect. Come get me when you’re ready to leave.”

“Will do,” William replies, dropping back down into his chair.

I continue down the row of cubicles until I reach my assigned one. Most of the ones I pass are occupied, and I smile at everyone who glances up to look at me.

I may be uncertain about a legal path, but it’s not because I’m unsure about my own abilities. I’m good at the research and writing that comprise the bulk of my duties. I quickly get lost in the familiar tasks and templates, startling when William approaches me hours later, ready to depart.

“Ready?” He gives me a tired smile.

“Yeah.” I save the document I was working on and close out of all the open tabs on my computer, standing and stretching.

Most of the cubicles still have residents, and I’m sure many, if not all, of them are judging the fact I arrived after them and am leaving before them. That’s one aspect of being a lawyer I definitely don’t enjoy. The cutthroat competitiveness.

“So? How was it?” William asks as we wait for the elevator to arrive.

“It was nice. Eliza and Tommy seem really happy.”

“Tommy was there?”

“Yeah. He was already planning to have his bachelor party on the Cape before Vegas got scrapped.”

“Huh. So not much of a girl’s trip after all?”

“Not really,” I admit.

“Scout cause any problems?”

“No. He loved it.”

The doors ding open, and we step inside the elevator.

“Garage,” William instructs the attendant.

The office building’s parking lot is half-full when the doors open again. An elite address such as this requires residents who don’t rest on laurels.

“I’ll meet you there?” William suggests.

“Yeah, sure.” Romantic.

“I’ll text you the address.” He gives me a quick kiss, and heads to the right. I walk left, toward my sedan. It’s dark when I drive out onto the street, headlights and the everlasting glow of fellow skyscrapers the only force against the night. I follow the directions the navigation system is expelling, heading in the direction of the seaport. I pull up in front of the restaurant and climb out, handing my keys to the valet.

William arrives a couple minutes later, and we head inside. It's located right on the water, with sweeping views overlooking the harbor that was teeming with tea, once upon a time. The decor is classy and elegant, decorated in shades of white, pale blue, and navy with a clear nautical inspiration. William gives his name to the hostess, and she leads us over to a table tucked in the corner with an unobstructed view of the water. She hands us menus and rattles off the specials.

"My parents came here last week," William tells me once she departs. "Said it was one of the best meals they'd had in ages."

"I can't wait," I tell him. "Dinner last night was cod."

"What's wrong with cod?" William asks as he studies the menu.

"I don't like it," I reply, startled to learn he didn't know that. I guess I never told him directly, just never ordered it. "Or any fish."

"Too bad," is William's response. "The ceviche here is supposed to be amazing."

The waitress returns, and I order a watermelon mint martini. William opts for a scotch.

"Did you end up leaving at a decent hour last night?" I ask him once she leaves again.

"Nope." He yawns. "Almost three."

"That's not healthy," I tell him.

He shrugs. "The work needed to get done. Not all of us got to go to the beach."

His tone is teasing, but I take it as an affront.

"Right."

The waitress returns with our drinks, and I seize the opportunity to order. "I'll have the truffle fries, burrata toast, and the gnocchi."

William raises his eyebrows at my large order but doesn't say anything. "Just the salmon," he adds.

The waitress scribbles down our requests and heads back in the direction of the kitchen. I take a long sip of my drink. Basil, watermelon, cranberry, and mint hit my tongue, along with a healthy dose of vodka. Paige would probably be beside herself.

William swishes his scotch around in his glass, then sniffs it.

I turn my gaze to the water, watching the city lights dance across the calm surface. William and I have been dating for almost three years. We ran

out of small talk a long time ago. But it's never struck me quite the same way as it is right now. Shouldn't we have *something* to say to each other?

We don't. Until the waitress returns with my fries and toast. My mouth waters as I stare down at the plates. The fries are drizzled with aioli and topped with shaved Parmesan. The toast is covered with prosciutto, burrata, pickled rhubarb, and a pomegranate reduction.

"Do you want any?" I ask William as I dig into the fries.

"No, I'm good, thanks." He takes a sip of his scotch. "We should have ordered champagne."

"Why?"

"To celebrate Gray and Ellington!"

"Oh. Right."

William studies my less-than-enthused expression. "Are you worried about telling your dad?" he questions. More than anyone, he knows the pressure I face when it comes to following in my father's footsteps. Even for what is objectively a better opportunity career-wise. I know that prestige is the only reason William is in full support.

"Sort of. But I'm also just… I don't know." It would be a lot easier to let this drop, but I forge ahead anyway. "Should I even take it?"

"What?"

"The job at Gray and Ellington. Should I take it?"

William looks at me with total shock. His handsome features are frozen with it. "What?" he repeats again. "What are you talking about, Eleanor?"

"I don't know if I want it," I admit.

"Don't know if you want it… It's the best law firm in the city! The job everyone we graduated with would list as their top choice!"

"Yeah, I know. But what would I really be doing there?"

"What?" William says for the third time. "Are you worried about the pressure? Because I'm sure it's nothing you won't be able to handle."

I grab my cocktail and take a long pull. Even before I instigated it, I had a feeling this would be one of those conversations where hard liquor is a necessity. "No, I'm not worried about the work. I just feel like… maybe it's not the work I *want* to be doing. I mean, what's the point of it?"

William unfreezes his face to gape at me. "The point of representing clients? Settling lawsuits? It's how issues are resolved, Eleanor."

"Yeah, but what issues would I be resolving at Gray and Ellington, exactly? Helping a corporation pay off a mistake? Making sure an injured

party receives as little money as possible?”

“Everyone deserves an attorney,” William replies. “Your job is to represent your client’s interests, not make judgments about their actions.”

“Not everyone receives an attorney with endless resources at their disposal, though,” I argue.

“So, what? You want to work for a non-profit?”

“I’m not sure what I want,” I reply truthfully. I’m not just talking about my job, but William doesn’t seem to sense that.

“I’ll support whatever you want to do,” he tells me. “But I think you’d be crazy to turn it down.”

“Noted.” I turn my gaze to the waitress approaching with our food.

Hating how uncertain I feel.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The following week is consumed by catching up on work at the firm and final preparations for the gala I'm hosting this weekend. It's being held at a local museum with a hidden garden cocooned from the city that surrounds it.

I arrive at the venue in the middle of the afternoon on Saturday to oversee everything, only darting home an hour before it's supposed to start in order to change. It's unseasonably cool for June, but the event is being held indoors, so I slip into the silk chiffon gown I was planning to wear regardless. It's one of the simpler gowns hanging in my closet, and it's an intentional choice. I encourage as many of the women who have benefitted from the charity I started to attend its annual fundraiser as possible. Most of them are still struggling to escape the crushing weight of debt and uncertainty, and I know none of them have the capacity to drop a sizable sum on an expensive dress. I do spend a while on my hair and make-up. Mostly because Kat James changed her RSVP to three, rather than the two it's been for the last five years I've held this event. I'm desperately hoping she's met a new boyfriend.

He wouldn't come, right? To an event *I'm* hosting? Based on our first interaction at the garage, when he threatened me with a *restraining order*, I'd say no chance at all.

Ryder James has always been excellent at doing things I'm not expecting, though.

When I arrive back at the museum, guests have already begun to arrive. I greet my parents, William, Paige, and some of my other friends, and then get whisked away by a member of the catering staff to approve a last-

minute change to the menu. By the time that's sorted out, the rented space is close to bursting. It's easy to tell the difference between the beneficiaries and benefactors, but the common characteristic seems to be everyone is genuinely enjoying themselves. I catch up with a few of the women who we've helped in the past, and then stroll around the room. I spot my father talking with some of his colleagues by the fountain, and he gives me a rare, genuine smile.

Starting this charity as a continuation of a project I had to complete for a business class I took sophomore year seems to be one of the few ideas I came up with on my own that my parents both whole-heartedly approve of. I know it means they've never considered where I came up with the idea to start with.

As though I've conjured her with my thoughts, I see Kat James leaning against one of the high tables that's been artfully scattered throughout the space. She sees me and gives a little wave, and I start to weave my way through the crowd to reach her. As I approach, I see she's got a glass of what I hope is soda. Her past problems stemmed from substances far more sinister than liquor, but addiction is a slippery slope.

"Hello, Kat," I greet. "You look nice." She's wearing a calf-length white dress I'm pretty sure she wore last year, but she's let her brown hair fall to her shoulders, which I've learned is something she only does on occasions she deems to have some sort of significance.

Ryder's mother grunts in response to my compliment. "Like this place better than the country club last year," she states in her signature gruff tone.

I hide a smile. Any outside observer would probably insist Kat has never warmed to me, but I've caught glimpses where I'm certain the older woman thinks more of me than she did when I first knocked on her trailer door. Not that that encounter set a high bar.

"Me, too," I reply.

She takes a sip of the amber-colored liquid that appears to be ginger ale, then shuffles around the corner of the table to give me a quick hug. "Nice to see you."

"Nice to see you," I echo, giving her a warm smile as she pulls back. "How have you been?"

"Pretty good lately," she replies. Her face betrays more than the three words. In my limited observation of her, I've ascertained Kat doesn't lack

any maternal instincts toward her sons, just struggles to convey them, even in the absence of the harmful influences I know have affected her life.

"Yeah, I'd imagine so."

Kat holds my gaze as we dance around the topic of Ryder. Not one of the conversations I've had with her or Christopher over the past seven years have included a mention of the reason we were first introduced. I've helped them out how I could, and they've let me, without any acknowledgment of the common thread between us. I know Ryder arrived at our weekend on the Cape with no idea I'd kept in touch with his family. He left with some clue, but I have no idea how much he knows now.

"Where's Christopher?" I ask.

"Right here."

I turn, and there he is, flashing me his usual devil-may-care smile. He's not alone. Behind him is Ryder. And behind him… a smiling blonde I instantly recognize as Lily Sampson, thanks to my amateur stalking skills.

"Hey!" I shift my full attention back to Christopher, giving myself a moment to process this new development. I was partially prepared to see Ryder here. Not at all expecting to encounter him here with a date. *It's fine, you don't care*, I assure myself. Lie to myself, rather.

"This might be the best one yet," Christopher informs me as he steps forward and gives me a hug. It's become the expected greeting between the two of us. I view Christopher as the little brother I never had, but the weight of his arms around me feels different with the heaviness of his biological brother's gaze on us. If Ryder didn't know I've kept in touch with his brother, he definitely does now.

"That's what I was just saying," Kat adds.

"And I noticed no seafood this year," Christopher continues. "Gave up on that, huh?"

Should I be concerned my own fiancé is unaware of my seafood aversion, yet Ryder's *brother* knows about it?

"Sure did," I confirm, then take a deep breath. The longer I put it off, the more awkward it will be. "Hi, Ryder." I finally look at him.

"Elle," he acknowledges.

"And who's this?" I slide my gaze to Lily, hoping I sound casual and uncaring. The infallible cut of my diamond engagement ring digs into my palm.

"This is Lily."

Lily's still smiling, but it's hesitant now. She knows exactly who I am. Oddly, her uncertainty provides me with some ease.

"Hi, Lily. Nice to meet you," I say casually.

"You too, Eleanor," she rushes to say. It's hard to tell for certain under the dimmed lights, but I'm fairly sure she's blushing. She acknowledged who I was before I introduced myself. Christopher raises an eyebrow, confirming he caught it, too.

There's a pause as none of us say anything.

"This is such a fantastic cause," Lily jumps in with. "And what a turn-out!"

"Thanks, Lily," I say flatly. She seems kind and genuine and well-meaning, and I kind of hate her for it. "I hope we have enough food. I only had your party down as three." I aim for a teasing tone, but based on the snort from Christopher, I fall short.

Ryder glowers at me. "Don't be a bitch, Elle."

Clearly, we're dropping the pleasantries.

"It's *Eleanor*," I emphasize. "And I don't take behavioral advice from immature assholes."

"Oh, *I'm* immature? Do you even—"

"Want to dance, Elle?" Christopher interrupts Ryder, earning him his own glare.

"Yeah, sure." I set down the flute of champagne I've been holding and then follow him out onto the dance floor. Christopher rests his hands on my waist, and I drape mine over his shoulders. He grins at me, and I sigh. "Was that as bad as I think it was?"

"It was pretty awkward," Christopher replies. "But awfully entertaining."

I scoff. "Surprised you interrupted, then."

"Well, it's been a while since I had a chance to piss my brother off. Guards get a little touchy about pranks."

I ignore his casual reference to Ryder's time in prison, unable to joke about it myself. "By keeping him from insulting me?" I say instead, nodding. "Yeah, he probably had some good ones cued up."

Christopher rolls his eyes. "No. By dancing with you."

"Ryder won't care," I inform him. "You did him a favor just now. When it comes to me, he's totally indifferent."

“Yeah, right.” Christopher laughs. Then he sobers. “I didn’t tell him about the scholarship, just so you know.”

“What scholarship?” I play dumb.

“Elle. Full rides to Ivy League schools don’t just fall in people’s laps. I didn’t even apply. Or write an essay about my addict mother and incarcerated brother.”

I sigh. “I just submitted a suggestion to the committee.”

“Yeah, right. I’m sure you did more than that.” I don’t deny it. “Thank you. I should have said it sooner.”

“You deserve it, Christopher.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he replies. “But we don’t always get what we deserve.” Christopher pauses again, like he’s considering something. “I won’t tell him about the scholarship. But I think you should. Let him know you care.”

I let out a dry laugh. “That’s not a good idea,” I reply.

“Because you don’t care?” Christopher suddenly sounds a lot older than nineteen.

“Because all ‘caring’ got me was a threatened restraining order.”

Christopher snorts. “He didn’t.”

“He did,” I confirm.

Christopher shakes his head. We sway in silence for a bit. “Guess congratulations are in order? You’re engaged.”

“Thanks. The ring is obnoxiously big, I know.”

He twists my left hand to inspect it. “Huh. Yeah, I guess it is.”

I narrow my eyes. “How did you know I’m engaged if you didn’t notice my ring?”

The song ends as Christopher flashes me a grin so much like his older brother’s it stings. “Mr. Indifferent told me.”

I give Ryder and his family a wide berth for the rest of the evening. It’s not hard to do; I’m probably the only person here who knows every person in attendance. I’m as involved in the charity as my busy schedule will allow, and those writing generous checks tonight are almost all friends of my parents whose children I grew up with.

“Eleanor!” I turn away from Paige’s mother, who I’ve been talking to for the last ten minutes, to see my mother beckoning me over. Dread drops in my stomach like a brick when I see who she’s talking to.

Mr. and Mrs. Hathaway.

“I guess duty calls,” I tell Paige’s mom as I force the smile that was just genuine.

She laughs and pats my arm. “Our children are never too old to be bossed around.”

“I’m sure my mother would agree with you,” I tell her. Kristen Clarke’s middle name might as well be overbearing.

“Congratulations on another successful fundraiser, Eleanor,” Paige’s mother compliments before moving on to socialize with another group. Leaving me with no other option but to heed my mother. No socially acceptable one, at least.

“Hi, Mrs. Hathaway. Mr. Hathaway,” I greet, clutching my champagne flute a little tighter as I approach Liam’s parents.

“Eleanor! So lovely to see you!” Mrs. Hathaway exclaims. Expensive bracelets jangle as she waves her arms around. “And look at this place! I was just telling your mother this is the event I’ve come to look forward to most each year.”

“High praise, considering how many we attend,” Mr. Hathaway chimes in, giving me his usual conspiratorial grin. At least he’s stopped trying to insist I call him by his first name.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hathaway,” I respond. “That’s nice to hear.”

I see my mother frown out of the corner of my eye in response to the bland tone I deliver the words in.

“It’s amazing how it’s grown every year, as well,” Mrs. Hathaway continues. “Wherever did you come up with such a fabulous idea to start with?”

“It was a project for one of her business classes at Yale,” my mother brags.

“Actually, Ryder James gave me the idea.”

Silence greets that admission. Both of the Hathaways look uncomfortable, but neither of them looks guilty. Unless they’ve recently become award-winning actors, it appears as though neither has any inkling of what Kennedy told me: that their son was actually the one who assaulted her.

“Well,” Mrs. Hathaway recovers first. “It was a good one.”

“What is Liam up to these days?” I ask, with no preamble.

“He’s still in London,” Mr. Hathaway replies. “One of my friends from business school has a start-up over there, and he asked Liam to help things get off the ground.” There’s a brief flash of emotion on his face, and I rethink my previous assessment as my intuition flickers. He set his only son up to leave the country?

“Does he get home much?” I press.

“We hardly see him,” Mrs. Hathaway bemoans. “We flew over for New Year’s, but I can’t recall the last time he was back home. Last summer, I think?”

“What a shame,” my mother replies. “Michael and I are lucky Eleanor stayed so close to home.” She gives me a smile than turns into a why-are-you-bringing-this-up look. She’s well aware I don’t harbor many positive feelings toward Liam Hathaway. Or *any*, now.

The conversation shifts to the garden club my mother and Mrs. Hathaway are both in, and I let it, excusing myself as soon as I can.

I chat with a few more people, and then make my way over to the bar. I’ve just ordered another glass of champagne when my father appears beside me.

“Looks like the evening was a success,” he tells me, appraising the crowd still remaining.

“Yup.”

“How have things been at the firm?”

“Fine.”

“I hope you’re more ebullient with the other associates,” my father remarks dryly.

I take my glass of champagne from the bartender, giving him a smile of thanks. “I got the job at Gray and Ellington.”

“Congratulations.”

I look over at him. “That’s it?”

“It’s the typical response to good news, correct?”

“I didn’t think you would consider it good news,” I reply.

Rather than confirm my statement, my father says, “Your mother told me you were rude to the Hathaways earlier.”

“I was perfectly polite.”

“Why were you asking about Liam?”

“Because Ryder James is innocent.”

My father doesn’t say anything.

“And if he’s innocent… that means someone else—” I pause, then force the ugly word out. “—raped Kennedy Jacobs.”

“I’m aware a crime must be committed by someone, Eleanor,” he replies.

“You haven’t considered who committed *that* crime?”

“That’s for the police to worry about. Not me. Not you.”

“Letting it go doesn’t seem fair to anyone.”

“If life were fair Sarah would be attending this event with the rest of us.”

I take a sip of champagne to swallow my shock, trying to recall the last time my father brought up Sarah. Aside from an annual trip to the cemetery, my parents generally act as though my older sister never existed.

“What do you think she would be like now?”

“I’m sure she’d be doing well for herself.” He takes a sip of his own drink.

“Do you think she’d be… happy?”

Unlike my mother, I know my father never harbored any delusions about Sarah’s moods. How her swings from one end of the emotional pendulum to the other were more than teenage angst.

“She never had any reason not to be,” my father answers.

His response makes perfect sense, and none at all. Despite all the privileges Sarah grew up with—that I grew up with—you can’t just will yourself to be happy.

“It’s after ten. Your mother will want to get going,” he continues, effectively ending our most meaningful conversation in years.

I nod, expecting him to head over to where I can see my mother laughing amongst some members of her garden club. But he lingers.

“I guess some good came out of your association with that boy.”

Evidently my mother shared more from our earlier conversation with the Hathaways than just my short tone.

“I guess so.” I tread carefully as I step into uncharted territory. Every time Ryder has come up between us, the discussion hasn’t gone very well.

“More than can be said for most school projects. Good night, Eleanor.”

“Night, Dad,” I manage, watching him walk away and too surprised to do anything besides stand here.

Because I’m pretty sure my father just revealed he was aware my relationship with Ryder James far pre-dated a senior year Homecoming date, and that’s one of several curveballs tonight I did not see coming.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The drive from the busy streets of Boston to the winding lanes leading to Eliza's family's beach house should be a relaxing one. William is driving, so all I have to do is stare out the window and enjoy the scenery. Unfortunately, I spend it rife with anxiety rather than eagerly looking forward to the holiday weekend. I didn't ask Eliza if Ryder was also invited to the Fourth of July celebration she and Tommy decided to throw as a last hurrah before their wedding, but I wanted to. Or more specifically, wanted to know if he accepted the invitation.

I don't have to wonder for long. A familiar truck is already parked on the clamshells. I'm surprised the vehicle is still running. Also taken aback by the nostalgia the sight of it sparks.

I climb out of the passenger seat, stretching before I let Scout out of the backseat. It's late; past eleven. Someone's assurance we'd be leaving by five turned out to actually mean nine-thirty, and that person was not me.

William looks around as he exits the car, the salt air ruffling his dark hair.

"Wow. This is nice." He studies the exterior of the large cottage, which is covered with wooden shingles stained light gray by the sodium dissolved in the air. You can't see the ocean in the dim light of the crescent moon, but the sound of surf is audible from here.

"Yeah, it is," I reply, inhaling the scent of the sea as I grab my bag from the trunk of William's Audi and start up the steps.

"Hello?" I call out as I step in the front door. "We're finally…"

I stop mid-announcement. Everyone is sprawled out in the living room located to the immediate right, playing some sort of card game. It's

essentially the same group that was here for the combined bachelor and bachelorette parties, except I'm not the only one who brought a significant other along this time. Jessica's husband is here, there's a petite woman perched next to Mike, and… Lily Sampson is seated beside Ryder.

"Here," I finish.

I'm distracted by Scout's excited bark. He's spotted Ryder, and clearly remembers him, sprinting over to his side and jumping up on him. I hurry after him, grabbing Scout's collar so I can pull my dog off my ex.

"I'm sorry," I tell Ryder.

"It's fine," he replies, smiling slightly. "I would have been offended if he forgot about all the quality time we spent with the tennis ball."

"Hey, everyone." William enters the house and is looking curiously at me holding a straining Scout. Everyone replies with generic greetings, and then I make introductions. William's met Eliza, Tommy, Jessica, and Paige before, but no one else. I'm relieved I retain a neutral tone when I introduce Ryder and Lily.

"What's wrong with Scout?" he asks me.

"He's just overexcited," I reply.

"Hmmm," William responds, and I'm certain he's holding back an *I told you so*. Eliza only invited us a couple days ago, but he managed to suggest we find a kennel to board Scout at three times. "This place is great, Eliza. We'd always head to the Hamptons if we were staying local. I can see why Eleanor was raving about her last trip here."

I certainly wouldn't have used the word *raving* to describe my assessment of the bachelorette party, and I don't think anyone else here that weekend would have either, if the glances I'm getting are any indication.

William is oblivious. "Maybe we should start looking for a place around here, babe."

"Yeah, maybe," I reply, still struggling with an eager Scout.

"I can take him down to the beach, if you want," Ryder offers, forcing me to look at him.

I give him a grateful smile. "Yeah, if you don't mind. He hasn't gotten much exercise lately."

Ryder nods and stands from the couch.

"You look kind of familiar," William comments unexpectedly. "Have we met before?"

Air stalls in my lungs, and it feels like the whole room is holding its breath right alongside me. I've never mentioned Ryder to William in any way, shape, or form. How could he possibly have…

Ryder solves the mystery. "Yeah. You were soliciting whiskey recommendations at the bar."

William snaps his fingers. "That's right." He glances at me, then back to Ryder. "What were you doing at Eleanor's gala?"

"His mom helped me start the charity," I blurt.

"Oh, really? That's great," William replies. "Have I met her?"

I nod once. "Kat."

"Christopher's mother?" William sounds surprised, and I'm certain I know why. He knows my relationship with Kat and Christopher predates ours. The fact I've never mentioned a third member of their family is strange. To anyone who doesn't know the full story, at least.

"Uh-huh," I answer.

Ryder approaches, and I let Scout go so he can jump all over him. William watches with a speculative expression.

"We were worried you guys weren't going to make it," Eliza chimes in. I give her a grateful glance.

"Yeah, sorry. Work ran long," I explain.

"Eleanor's just being nice," William adds. "It's my fault. I told her I'd be ready to leave at five. Something came up with a client that really couldn't wait."

"Well, you're here now. That's all that matters," Eliza responds. "Do you guys want anything to eat? Or drink?"

"I'm all set," I reply. "I'm pretty tired, actually." I went into the office at six this morning in order to be ready to leave on time. A wasted effort, in hindsight.

"Me, too," William adds with a yawn.

"Okay. I'll show you guys your room." Eliza jumps up from the couch and heads for the stairs. William and I follow. "This okay?" she asks as we enter the bedroom across the hall at the top of the stairs.

"Great," I respond, setting my suitcase down on the floor.

"Beautiful view," William adds, looking out the window that overlooks the beach.

"Just wait until the morning," Eliza replies. "I'll let you two get settled."

"Good night," I give her a hug.

“Night. Night, William!”

“Night, Eliza,” he replies.

I grab my toiletry kit as soon as she disappears, heading down the hall to get ready for bed. Exhaustion seems to have replaced the marrow in my bones. Work has been crazy, but that’s not the sole source of my fatigue. Nor is the endless stream of messages from my mother with wedding semantics. Or the lack of communication from William.

I still feel stuck. Unsure. Being around Ryder amplifies it.

Once I finish getting ready for bed, I walk back downstairs. The card game is still going strong, so I just give the group a small wave as I pass them and head for the French doors. Moonlight reflects off the water, providing just enough illumination for me to see a human and canine figure on the beach. I walk outside, inhaling deeply as my hair swirls around my face. The ocean looks dark and menacing, inky ripples slithering onto the shore and retreating. I can’t hear anything but the pound of the dark water on the sand, and it quiets the thoughts bouncing around my brain.

“You good?”

I turn, and Ryder’s standing there, slightly crouched to hold Scout’s collar. No surprise he wasn't eager to head back to the house.

“Yeah,” I reply. “Here, I can take him.”

I move to grab Scout’s collar, and Ryder lets go. The palm of his hand brushes my knuckles, and goosebumps I can’t blame on the breeze rise on my skin.

“Are you? Good?”

“Yeah. I’m good,” Ryder responds, running his now-free hand through his hair. I hate he still does that.

“Good.” I don’t think I’ve ever uttered the word *good* so many times in a row, but it seems as good a way to move on from the angry words we exchanged a week ago at the gala as any. “Good night.”

“Night,” he says as I turn away.

I leave Ryder out on the deck and return to the bedroom. William is fast asleep on the bedspread, still in his suit. At least he took off his shoes. I lock Scout in his crate, change into pajamas, and climb under the covers. I’m asleep seconds after my head hits the soft pillow, eager to sink into the reliable escape of sleep.

The following morning, I'm awakened by the first streaks of sunrise. Golden fingers are creeping in through the slit between the shade and the window frame. William must have woken up at some point because he's now wearing pajamas and under the covers with me.

I slip out of bed silently, changing into a strapless dress and grabbing my toiletries kit again. After using the bathroom, I head downstairs with Scout. No one else is up yet. The living room bears clear signs of last night's activities, with empty wine glasses and beer bottles littering the side tables. A half-eaten bowl of popcorn sits on the couch. I pull Scout away from the enticing snack and out onto the back deck.

Once we reach the beach, I unclip his leash, allowing him to roam free. Scout takes full advantage, alternating between sniffing and sprinting along the edge of the surf that's now a crystalline, clear blue.

I'm about to call him back when he starts racing back in my direction. Except he doesn't stop when he reaches me. He keeps running, and I turn to see Ryder descending the stairs, wearing a t-shirt and basketball shorts.

"What did you do to my dog?" I ask in greeting. "He's obsessed with you."

Ryder grins. "Good morning to you, too."

"Morning." We may be unable to make it through a full conversation without exchanging some sort of insult, but we've got time of day greetings down.

He crouches down to pet Scout, who's still leaping on him, begging for attention. "Hey, buddy," he says as he strokes him.

"I'm surprised you're here," I tell him.

"Didn't have any other plans for the weekend," Ryder replies, still petting Scout. "And the last trip wasn't terrible."

I can't see his face, so I'm not sure whether I'm imagining the teasing edge to his voice or not. "Can't believe you managed to make it here in that old truck. I figured it was gone since you didn't drive it here last time."

Ryder glances up, and he's smirking. "That old truck works fine. They don't—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. They don't make them like that anymore," I finish. "I hope you've fixed the doors, at least."

"Only seemed to pose a problem for you," Ryder retorts. "But Chris took good care of it while I was… gone."

"Yeah, I know. He let me change the oil once."

Ryder laughs. “Not really surprised. You pretty much hung the moon, as far as he’s concerned. Got a real earful from him about the gala.”

“Me, too,” I admit.

He gives me a surprised glance. “About what?”

“You.”

Ryder raises both brows. “Really?”

“He’s your brother. Of course he’s protective of you.”

“I guess so. We usually opt for the tough love approach.”

“Since we’re clearing the air, I should probably… I’m sorry for how I acted at the gala.” I look down at the sand Scout’s rolling in. “I was jealous and immature. I just… it was weird for me. Seeing you with someone else.”

“It’s okay,” Ryder says softly, and I finally look at him. “It was weird for me too. Still is.” He pauses. “I’m sorry, too. If the scolding Mom gave me was any indication, I was pretty out of line.”

“Kat told you off?” A ball of warmth appears in my chest.

Ryder nods, sucking his bottom lip between his teeth. “Oh, yeah.”

Neither of us say anything as he continues to pet Scout, who’s ecstatic about the unending attention.

“I made a pot of coffee, if you want some,” Ryder eventually adds. “I don’t think anyone else is up yet. It ended up being a late night.”

“Okay,” I reply.

“All right if we play some fetch?” He nods to Scout.

“Pretty sure he would disown me if I said no,” I respond. “Go for it.”

Ryder nods once, and then continues down the beach. Scout follows him. I head inside. The kitchen is empty and silent. I fill a mug with coffee and add some oat milk from the fridge. I take a seat on one of the island stools, then rise again a couple minutes later. Restless, I walk into the living room, clearing the empty bottles and glasses. I put all the glasses in the dishwasher and the bottles in the recycling. The stale popcorn ends up in the trash.

There still aren’t any signs of life in the house, so I head back out onto the deck, descending the stairs. Ryder and Scout are playing in the sand, and I sink down a dozen feet away, sipping my coffee as I watch them. The sun has risen completely, making the scene before me look like it belongs on a postcard. Hot guy, happy dog, heavenly view.

After about fifteen minutes, Ryder walks over and takes a seat next to me on the beach. Scout takes the opportunity to chase a seagull into the

ocean.

I sigh as I watch him run through the water. “Do you think Eliza’s going to like him less or more soaking wet?” I ask.

“Less would be my guess,” Ryder responds, smiling.

It’s a few minutes before I speak again. “So, you brought Lily.”

“Yeah,” Ryder confirms. “I did.”

“Are you guys… serious?”

“We’ll see,” is his vague response.

I don’t press any further. It’s none of my business.

“How’s work?” Ryder asks, effectively shifting subjects.

I shoot him a side glance. “You’re asking me about my job?”

“Isn’t that a common small talk topic?”

“Sure. Just the last one I thought you’d choose to ask me about.”

“It’s important to you, right?”

“I guess so,” I reply. “Work’s fine. I’m working at my father’s firm for the summer, so I’m pretty sure everyone’s judging me for not deserving the job.”

“Isn’t the other job you got at a better firm than your father’s?”

“Objectively speaking, yes.” I sigh. “I haven’t taken it.”

“The job?”

“Yeah.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not sure… if I want it.”

Concern flashes across Ryder’s handsome face. “This isn’t about… This isn’t because of what I said. Right?”

I roll my eyes. “Give me some credit. I don’t make life choices based on my ex-boyfriend’s opinion.” I give him a quick glance, embarrassed by the slip. We never put labels on our high school interactions. “You just… said some things I was already thinking, I guess. Gave them some validity.”

“It’s *your* life, Elle.”

“Yeah, I know. Lots of people have strong opinions about how I should live it, though. I’ve never been great about tuning those out.”

“You did with us.”

I raise my eyebrows at that, and he shrugs. “You can’t honestly tell me any of your family or friends told you it was a good idea to date me.”

“Yeah, well, you were an easy choice.”

“Do you regret it?”

I don’t have to think about my answer. “No. I’ve never regretted it, Ryder.”

“Hey! Breakfast!”

I turn to see Eliza leaning over the railing, waving to us. Everyone else seems to already be out on the deck. Both Ryder and I stand, and I call Scout. He bounds over, happily shaking salty water and sand all over me.

We head for the stairs. Ryder falls into step a few paces behind me. I wonder if it’s an attempt to distance us in front of the prying eyes I can feel tracking our progress to the deck.

“Morning, everyone,” I greet as I set my mug on the table and take a seat next to William.

Sleepy smiles greet me.

“You were up early,” William says.

“Yup. Sun woke me,” I respond, grabbing one of the muffins that have been set out on the table.

“So I was thinking after breakfast we could play some football,” Tommy announces as he appears on the deck, holding a steaming plate of scrambled eggs. “Really embrace the American spirit for the Fourth.”

Mike snorts. “I’d rather just drink copious amounts of Budweiser to embrace the American spirit.”

Tommy groans as he sinks down in his chair. “I need a break from drinking after last night. Plus, Ryder’s here, so I’ll actually be able to catch some passes.”

Mike flips a grinning Tommy off. “I’d never played quarterback, okay?”

“You never played anything,” Tommy retorts. “Ryder’s the only one who was good enough to actually play.”

“One game,” Mike scoffs. “Hardly a flourishing career.”

“One more than you played,” Ryder jumps in with, finally joining the conversation.

“Please. You never would have even played in that one if you weren’t trying to impress…”

Mike doesn’t say my name, but the glance he shoots my way pretty much gives away who he’s talking about for the few people at this table who didn’t already know Ryder and I share a romantic past. Unfortunately, those few people include my fiancé.

I’m more occupied by the trip down memory lane, though.

“If he was trying to impress me, I don’t think he would have spent ten minutes yelling at me about how he had better things to do with his time when I suggested he play,” I say, before taking a bite of muffin.

Ryder glares at me, but it doesn’t hold any hostility. Mike chokes on a laugh.

“That trailer had thin walls, Ry,” Tommy contributes, laughing.

“You just wanted to cheer for a winning team for once,” Paige tells me, laughing as well.

We’re all dancing around Liam’s name, but the conversation is light despite the heavy reminder. The first two months of senior year were a couple of the best ones in my life. It’s a relief to let the pain and confusion that closely followed them fall away, even if only for a moment, and focus on the positive.

As soon as breakfast ends, the men all head down to the beach to toss a football around. Well, almost all. William excuses himself to make a work call. I stay out on the deck to enjoy the warm sun and company of some of my closest friends. Lily leaves a couple minutes after the guys to take a shower.

Once she disappears inside, Paige turns to me. “Did you seriously not tell William about you and Ryder before you came here?”

I lean back in my chair and rest my feet on the railing that encircles the deck. “Do you normally share your dating history from seven years back?”

Paige rolls her eyes. “If I’m vacationing with the guy and we still have off-the-charts chemistry? Yeah, I probably would.”

I shrug, but don’t say anything, prompting the conversation to shift to wedding preparations. Tommy and Eliza’s wedding is only two weeks away. It’s hard to believe after having spent the past year hearing her go over each detail of it again and again. She’s never expressed anything to me except excitement about her upcoming nuptials. *I’m* excited about them. I’m just not excited about mine.

I don’t contribute much to the discussion, mostly just alternating between looking at the water and staring at the boys playing football on the beach. At one boy.

Ever since I learned where Liam currently is, I’ve spent time combing through London police reports. It’s most likely a complete waste of time and a job better suited for someone who’s had some form of law enforcement training, as my father said. It helps, though. And I know I’m

not just searching for justice for Kennedy. I'm seeking out revenge on Ryder's behalf.

Watching him throw a football wearing a backwards baseball cap and a wide grin on his face, I feel a little of that burning desire to *do something* ease. Acknowledging the fact that not letting something go gives it more power over you.

"Scale of one to ten, how worried should I be?"

"Huh?" I turn my attention back to the deck, surprised to realize Paige is now the only one still out here with me.

"Elle…" I jolt. She hasn't called me that since high school.

"I think about him all the time," I whisper. "I play back all these moments we shared. Then. Now. I keep waiting for that to be enough. To just be… over it."

"What about William? You love him, right?"

"William's perfect. Well, no one's perfect, but I always thought he is as close as it gets. Maybe he is. Maybe he's just not perfect for me."

I expect Paige to look triumphant, but her gaze is troubled and sad when I look over at her. "Is this all because of Ryder? Because—well, he—I mean what has he told you? Explained?"

I huff an unamused laugh. "Nothing. You know that."

"So, what? You're going to break off your engagement to be with a guy who had issues in high school and is even more unpredictable now?"

I trace the ridge of the railing with my toes. "I thought you'd tell me to follow my heart."

"I know things between you two are crazy intense. I saw it in high school—maybe before you did—and I see it now. But what if that's all it is? You moved on for a reason."

"Yeah. Because I didn't think he was an option. Ever would be an option. I couldn't forgive—if he'd really done it. But he didn't, Paige," I plead.

"I know. But he did bring another girl here. It took you, what? A year before you'd date any guy at Yale? He's been out just over a month. Epic love stories have to be two-sided."

I swallow. I don't think I've totally imagined some of the things Ryder's done and said as suggesting there's more than just lingering attraction between us. But Paige's technically right. He's given me no clear indication he still has feelings for me.

“I’m sorry. Maybe I’m being too harsh. You know I’ll support you no matter what. Maybe you should break off the engagement with William and keep dating? Just tell him you're not ready for marriage yet.”

“It’s fine, Paige. I needed to hear that,” I assure her. She studies me, and I hide how deeply some of her words cut. When your flighty, reckless best friend tells you something’s a bad idea, it’s generally a good idea to listen.

“Come on. Let’s bike into town,” Paige suggests, standing and stretching.

Exercise and space both sound like good ideas, so I agree. “Okay.” I down the last of my coffee and follow her through the French doors into the kitchen. I rinse my mug and stick it in the dishwasher. “I’m just going to check on William,” I tell Paige. She nods.

William’s in the same spot on the couch I worked from during my last visit here when I enter the sunporch.

“Hey,” he glances up and smiles.

“Hey,” I reply. “Your call’s finished?”

“Yeah, but I’ve got to get this motion submitted now so it can be filed first thing tomorrow.” He gives me a sheepish smile. “Sorry.”

Suddenly, I feel like the worst person in the world. I experience a rush of appreciation toward William. Toward the steady, reliable, hard-working guy I’m lucky enough to have found. Paige’s words come back to me. *Epic love stories have to be two-sided.* I thought things between me and Ryder were epic. But what is epic? Confusing, consuming, and devastating? Or reassuring and comforting and lasting? At least with William I know things are two-sided. He’s never made me doubt how he feels about me. Maybe that’s the most important trait of all.

“It’s fine. I get it.” I walk over to the couch and take a seat next to him. “The firm’s lucky to have you.” I give him a genuine, warm smile, which he returns.

“So, you’ve known Ryder a while, huh?”

“Yeah…” I’m relieved he’s brought it up, so I don’t have to. “I should have said something before we got here. I wasn’t sure if he would be. We had a thing in high school, but it was forever ago now.”

“It’s fine. I was just surprised. Especially when you said he’s Christopher’s brother. I’ve heard you talk about the kid, but never Ryder.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek, deliberating over how honest to be. “It didn’t end well.”

“You seem to be getting along all right now.”

I’m guessing William would think differently if he’d been here for the combined bachelor and bachelorette parties.

“We’re adults now.” I actually think Ryder and I were two of the more mature high schoolers in Fernwood, but the exception was generally when we interacted. That seems to have held true into adulthood. “Anyway, I was going to see if you wanted to bike into town with me and Paige, but I’m guessing you’d rather get some work done.”

William gives me a knowing smile. “Yeah, I would.”

“Okay. I’ll leave you to it, then.” I lean in to give him a quick kiss, and he surprises me by deepening it, pressing me back against the soft pillows on the couch and slipping his tongue inside my mouth. We make out like horny teenagers for a couple of minutes, until I pull back. “Paige is waiting…”

“Okay.” William gives me one more quick peck. “Have fun.”

“I probably shouldn’t say the same.” I wink. “See you in a bit.”

Paige and I don’t return to the house for several hours. By the time we do, preparations are in full swing for the barbecue we’re having before heading down the beach to watch the fireworks. I help shuck corn, set out plates, and go out to buy extra ice. Anything to keep busy. To keep from being in the same room as Ryder. I feel too exposed to talk to him after my conversation with Paige. Admitting to someone else my feelings for Ryder are strong enough I’ve contemplated ending my engagement feels a lot different than thinking about it myself. Facing some of the truths she pointed out in response didn’t exactly help.

Dinner goes off seamlessly, everyone’s too busy eating smoked meat and drinking cold beer to spark any deep conversations. Or to notice how I keep the length of the table between me and Ryder. We finish eating, clean up, and then everyone prepares to depart for the fireworks.

I head down to the beach to let Scout run around before we leave. I toss the ball for him a few times, and then coax him back through the dunes. I’m almost to the stairs when I realize there’s someone sitting on the bottom step.

“You’re avoiding me,” Ryder states, standing and leaning against the railing.

“What? No, I’m not.”

“Yeah, you are. I thought we were good after this morning, but you’ve barely looked at me since breakfast or said a single word to me.

“Maybe my world doesn’t revolve around you, Ryder. My best friends and fiancé are here. Maybe I’m busy.”

“Did something happen? Did—”

“Nothing happened! Just drop it. I’ve got to go get ready to leave.”

I try to brush past him, but one hand on my arm stops any forward motion.

“Elle, come on. You never ignore me. Even when you’re pissed off.” Annoyance bubbles inside me. He’s right. Because I couldn’t get enough of his attention.

“Right.” I snort, then try to move past him again. He stops me. Again.

Annoyance turns to anger. “Move, Ryder!”

“I will. Just tell me what’s wrong.”

“I don’t need to tell you anything. Now let me go inside before everyone starts gossiping about us arguing again.”

“No one’s gossiping about us.”

I snort. “Not to you, maybe. I’m the one who’s going to have to dodge questions about it.”

“About what?”

“Us arguing. Paige likes to remind me of how much of a fool I make of myself. I’m sure Tommy, Mike, and everyone else who knew us back then are thinking the same.”

“The same?”

“It’s fine. Forget I said anything. It’s how we are, right? How we always were.”

Confusion flashes across Ryder’s face. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I was always the one chasing you. I was always the invested one. I mean, half the time in high school I wasn’t even sure if you wanted me around. It seemed like you were just indulging me. Humoring me.”

Anger flares on Ryder’s face, rather than the pity I was expecting.

“Are you kidding me, Elle?”

“Uh, no,” I reply, caught off guard. “I’m not upset about it anymore. I was just stating a fact—”

“You think I didn’t want you around? That I was *humoring* you?”

“Um, yes?”

“You don’t know *anything*, Elle.”

“You didn’t tell me *anything*, Ryder. Then or now. I’m not a fucking mind reader.”

He huffs out an annoyed sigh and drops his hand from my arm. I start up the stairs, and Scout races past me, bounding up to the door.

“Elle.”

I halt, half-way up the stairs.

“I wasn’t—I’ve never humored you. Okay?”

“Okay.”

I start climbing the steps again, and this time Ryder doesn’t say or do anything to stop me. When I enter the house with Scout everyone’s still racing about grabbing drinks, blankets, and bug spray. No one seems to have noticed my absence—or Ryder’s—which I’m hoping means my worries about sparking gossip were unfounded.

We set off as a group a few minutes later. There’s a public stretch of beach about a mile down from where Eliza’s family’s cottage is located that provides a perfect view of the town’s Fourth of July fireworks display. The sun set a while ago, but the blazing lights of the houses lining the shore illuminate our way, along with the flashlights we brought along for precisely this purpose.

I stay in the front of the group with Paige and William. Ryder entered the house a few minutes after I did but hasn’t made another attempt to talk to me. I’m grateful. Our last chat undid the shaky progress I’d made today in determining where things stand between us. It’s as though he has some sort of radar on how best to confuse things I thought were settled.

There’s a massive turn-out on the beach, and it takes us a while to pick our way through the crowd that’s already claimed patches of sand to claim our own. Finally, we find a spot, dropping the towels and drinks we brought and waiting for the show to start. It’s not a long wait.

Fireworks begin to explode minutes later, shooting colored lights upward into the inky black sky that drift back down in tendrils of smoke. The bright sparks explode over and over again in brilliant patterns reflected on the textured surface of the ocean below. Upbeat music blasts from

speakers set along the beach, surrounding the exuberant crowd. I stare up at the dazzling display as I take sips of the alcohol we smuggled in, battling the bizarre urge to cry.

"I'll be right back," I whisper to William. "I have to use the bathroom."

"You're going to miss the rest of the show," he replies.

I shrug. "I'll be quick."

I head for the long, low building situated along the back of the beach reserved for changing rooms and restrooms. Like always, there's a substantial line for the women's and none for the men's. There's a familiar face waiting at the end of the line, one I probably would have noticed was missing from our group if I'd allowed myself to look over at Ryder.

"Hi, Lily," I say, giving her my best attempt at a warm smile.

"Hey, Eleanor." She returns it, looking equally strained.

"Enjoying the fireworks?" I ask.

"Yeah. They're beautiful. It's a perfect night."

"Yes, it is," I agree.

Silence.

"You're working at Washington and Stevens for the summer?"

Work. Common ground.

"Yes," I confirm. "Just doing my part to help the rich get richer, you know?" The words are wry.

A confused look greets that comment. "Okay…"

"Ryder hasn't shared any of his views on corporate law with you?"

"Uh, no."

"You should ask him about it. I'm sure he'd love to discuss them with someone who shares his views."

"Shares his views?"

"You work for a non-profit. You're not helping corporations cover up their mistakes the way I am."

"I've never gotten the impression Ryder has any opinion on my career," Lily replies.

I snort. "Must be nice. He's awfully judgmental when he wants to be."

"Or when he cares," Lily responds.

"Oh, no," I rush to say. "That's not what I was trying to say at all—"

"It's fine, Eleanor," Lily says. "I knew it was a long shot going into it. I read… I knew it was probably going to be like this. I saw you two at the

gala, and I ignored it. This trip, well… you're hard to compete with. Impossible, actually."

"Oh." It's slowly occurring to me instigating a conversation with my ex-boyfriend's current girlfriend about my ex-boyfriend's thoughts on my choice of profession while moderately tipsy was perhaps not the greatest idea I've ever had. I've somehow tripped down a rabbit hole of having to reassure her about her relationship with Ryder.

"I don't—it's not—things aren't like that between Ryder and me anymore."

"They're like that for him," Lily insists, sounding awfully certain. "And I'm pretty sure they're like that for you, too."

I glance away from her knowing gaze.

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

"He won't even tell me what happened back then," I admit. "If he cared about me at all, he'd at least give me that."

"Maybe not telling you is his way of showing you he cares."

I study her, suddenly aware Lily has had access to some information I haven't had access to. "What does that mean?"

"We try to protect the people we love."

"Yeah, well he never told me that either." Yeah, I'm definitely on the cusp of being drunk. Pretty certain that's the type of thing you don't disclose to an ex's current flame.

"Do you know why I called you?"

"You said I could help you find some information." It's a statement that comes out sounding like a question. Because isn't that something *she* should know?

Lily looks to the line that hasn't moved at all. "Yeah, well, I lied. There was no reason to contact you. Except for the fact I was curious."

"Curious?" I echo.

"I'd just started at Until Proven Guilty when we got Ryder's case. I only graduated law school a couple years ago. It's not the same as working at a fancy firm, but you still want to prove yourself, you know?" I nod. "Anyway, there was this new case. The kind that keeps you up at night because there are pieces that just don't make any sense. And not in the way where you feel like the right calls were made at the time."

"Ryder's case," I whisper.

“Right,” Lily confirms. “I went to see him the day we got it. It was my first time going to a prison. Have you ever been?”

“Once.” I don’t disclose I never made it past the front desk.

“I passed all these sleazy drug dealers, and then there was this guy with a friendly smile who pulled my chair out for me at the table. I kept going back to visit him, and then I got invested in the case for a whole other reason. I’d start going over old notes in the evenings, trying to pick up on things everyone else might have missed. There was one particular transcript from that night. An interview with a girl named Danielle Collins. She wasn’t directly involved with anything that happened, so no one seemed to pay anything she said much attention. Probably because she swore up and down Ryder was innocent all along.”

“Okay…” I say when she pauses, still unclear on what she’s trying to tell me.

“I tracked Danielle Collins down. According to her, she knew he was innocent because Ryder James didn’t have any interest in a girl in Fernwood not named Elle Clarke. Your name wasn’t anywhere in the file we had, which seemed odd, since Danielle said you were dating Ryder.” It suddenly occurs to me my parents might have shipped me off for reasons besides stemming gossip. “Other interviews indicated he was interested in the victim, which fit better with the prosecutor’s narrative. So, I brought you up to him the next time I visited Pennfield.”

“I’m sure that went well,” I deadpan.

“Yeah. Great.” Lily catches the sarcasm. “He seemed more upset about the thought of you getting involved than losing his appeal. I was curious, so I called you. The way you reacted when I did… well it just made me even more so. But then the DNA evidence came through, the judge ordered his immediate release, and I tried to let it go.”

“DNA evidence?” I’m feeling sober now, that’s for sure.

“Yeah. There was some collected. It was never tested because Ryder pled guilty. The judge finally agreed we’d poked enough holes in the narrative to test it. When it didn’t match, he was released.”

“Did they compare anyone else’s?”

“There was just the one sample. There’s nothing left to test now.”

“Oh.” I wonder who had to make that decision.

“I haven’t been at Until Proven Guilty for very long, but I’ve worked on a lot of different cases. People who have gotten out after forty years and are

totally lost in their lives. Who will never get out because the person swearing they were at home is a loved one with an investment in lying. There aren't many happy endings or second chances at the end of the road."

"Ryder wants a fresh start. I'm the furthest thing from that."

Lily shrugs. "I'm a lawyer, not a therapist. You said Ryder doesn't have feelings for you. I'm telling you he does."

I chew my bottom lip. I've somehow fallen into an alternate reality where my best friend told me Ryder is a bad idea, and the girl he's maybe dating at the moment is telling me to go for it.

Lily gives me a small smile that suggests she's confident I'll make the right decision. If I knew what that is, maybe I'd be just as certain. Unfortunately, I'm more confused than ever. I'm surrounded by nothing but big, important decisions and no easy choices.

And the longer I wait, the more will be made *for* me, rather than *by* me.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

William follows me into the entryway of my childhood home.

"Mom? Dad? Anyone home?" I call out as we enter. No answer. William and I walk past the circular staircase, through the long hallway, and out into the backyard. My parents are out on the back patio, sipping drinks in their matching Adirondack chairs.

"Eleanor! William! You're early!" my mother exclaims, leaping out of her seat.

"No traffic," William explains, kissing her cheek. "Lovely to see you, Kristen."

"You, too, William," she responds, smiling warmly.

"Hi, Dad," I greet, helping myself to a splash of the lemonade my mother is drinking.

"Eleanor. How are things?"

"Fine." I take a sip of lemonade and make a face. It's hard lemonade, apparently.

The rest of the cocktail hour is mostly spent hearing about my parents' recent trip to Paris. William's an eager participant, but I continue my recent trend of being a passive one. I'm too consumed by my own thoughts to offer up more than a few appreciative sounds as my mother describes the bistros and museums they visited.

We eventually migrate into the formal dining room for dinner. Cheerful conversation continues as I push the steak around my plate. Past the green beans and around the potatoes. In an endless loop, just like the doubts in my head.

"Eleanor!"

Based on the tone of my mother's voice, it's not the first time she's called my name.

"What?" I glance up.

"What about August for an engagement party? Everyone was so disappointed your trip to California came up, but we can just expand the guest list and have a larger event."

"We'll see," I reply, taking a bite of potato.

"See? Eleanor, venues book up years in advance!"

"Uh-huh," I respond, sipping at my wine.

My mother sighs. "I'll make a few calls and send you some suggestions."

"Great." I don't think my mother catches the sarcasm, but my father does.

He turns to William. "How are things going at the firm?"

"Everyone has been fantastic. I was speaking with Billings last night, and…"

I tune the conversation out again. I'm totally indifferent to the discussion about working at Washington and Stevens. And to the people sitting at this table. I love my parents. I think I loved William. Or at least loved the idea of him. But right now? I want to be any place but the formal dining room of the house I grew up in.

I'm craving ocean air and sand between my toes. That's where I wish I was right now. Not because I'm suddenly some sort of beach aficionado. Because it's a place I now associate with *him*.

I want to be any place Ryder James is.

The realization hits me like an anvil. I may not have any assurances of how Ryder feels about me, but I know how I feel about him. I also know it's not a way you're supposed to feel about a guy when you're engaged to another one.

Is love expectations and fancy restaurants and jumping out of bed to brush your teeth before your partner wakes up? Or is it scintillating kisses and arguments and never feeling like there's something you can't discuss?

Assurance or anticipation?

Certain or confusing?

Tired or thrilling?

There's never really been a choice for me. I wasn't lying to Ryder when I said choosing him in high school was an easy one. Even when I wanted to

resist him, I couldn't. I wish I felt differently now. I don't, even knowing that things between us are more complicated than ever before. That there's a lot more sitting between us than just the fact I'm engaged to someone else.

"Is everything set for Eliza's wedding?" My mother asks as William and my father continue to discuss colleagues and clients.

"Yes," I respond, before cutting a green bean in half.

"She's getting married out on the Cape?"

"Right," I confirm.

My mother lets the conversation drop, leaving me to cut up the rest of my dinner in silence. I stay quiet through dessert and coffee, and it's the first thing William asks me about when we climb in the car.

"Are you getting sick, or something? You were awfully quiet during dinner."

An opening to tell him I'm in love with someone else. I falter; not because I'm unsure. Because I've had my heart broken twice before, and it's not something I ever wanted to inflict on anyone else. Worst of all, I was always aware things between me and Ryder could fall apart at any moment. William's had no such forewarning. He's not going to see this coming, and that makes it all the worse.

"I'm not coming down with anything," I reply, but don't provide any other explanation for my strange behavior.

"Okay. So, what do you think about August?"

"Huh?" I ask absentmindedly, staring out the window as I try to sort through the words I need to say to him.

"August? For the engagement party?"

"Oh." I take a deep breath, steeling myself. "Um, no. I don't think so."

"You want to push it to the fall? We'll be just as busy then, and your mother's already handling everything."

"No. I don't think we should have an engagement party."

"What?" William glances away from the road. "Why not?"

"Because I don't think we should get married, William." I rush the words out like I'm tearing off a band-aid.

"What?"

It was a bad idea to have this conversation while he's driving. William's not even looking at the road.

"I don't want to get married."

"What?" he repeats again.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have accepted your proposal. It—our parents were there, and everyone was looking at us, and I just—I shouldn’t have said yes.”

William swerves onto the shoulder of the road. “Are you fucking kidding me, Eleanor?”

“Um, no,” I respond, startled by both the reckless driving and the swearing. I don’t usually associate William with either. “You’re an amazing guy, William. I’m so happy I met you. I’m just—we’re *so* young.”

“Cut the crap, Eleanor. This is about the guy from the Fourth. Ryder.”

I meet his eyes. I owe him honesty. “He has a little to do with it,” I admit. “We have a past.”

“He’s a mess.”

I shrug. “So am I.”

William scoffs, then runs a hand across his face. “I can’t believe this. I really can’t believe this.”

I swallow thickly. We’ve been dating for almost three years. This is never how I imagined it ending, and I’m the one doing so. I can’t imagine how he’s feeling right now. “I am so sorry, William. I don’t know what else to say. I just… I know we work together, but we don’t fit. We would be happy, but nothing more than that…” Not the fireworks and butterflies I feel around Ryder. I’m not sure how to verbalize that effervescent feeling, especially not in the midst of ending an engagement.

William looks straight at me for the first time during this car wreck of a conversation. “He’s going to break your heart.”

I swallow a lump in my throat and blink a couple times, opting not to share he missed an *again* at the end of that sentence.

“It’s his to break,” I admit.

William shakes his head a couple of times. “Wow.”

He pulls back onto the highway, driving faster than usual. Obviously eager to end this evening. William’s car comes to a stop outside the brownstone. I unbuckle my seatbelt and grab my clutch.

“I’ll be professional at work. But outside of that, I don’t want to see you. Or talk to you.”

I nod. “I understand.”

My capitulation seems to anger him more.

“You’re making a big mistake, Eleanor.”

“Maybe,” I reply, instead of sharing the first response that came to mind.

I climb out of the car, and William’s off as soon as I close the door. I watch his taillights travel down the street until they disappear entirely.

Or maybe I’m fixing one.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The following week is spent burying myself in work and watching romantic comedies. Maybe if I see enough happy endings, I'll absorb one through osmosis. I'm willing to do whatever it takes at this point.

William keeps his word. He's cordial at work, but only when we're absolutely forced to interact. I'm sure there's gossip around the firm about our break-up but confirming that would require paying attention to anything besides what people ask me directly. I cocoon myself in a bubble that includes nothing but my summer associate assignments, Scout, and every actor who's starred in a film with cheesy dialogue and a happy ever after.

My parents haven't spoken to me since I informed them I broke things off with William the day after it happened. I imagine the silence is meant to be a punishment, but it's more of a reward.

I leave the office early on Friday, ignoring the side glances being cast my way. I already decided I won't be accepting Washington and Stevens' employment offer. Not only does it mean I'll gain some independence from my father; it also means meeting William's accusing stares has an expiration date. Slowly, I'm inching toward the outcomes I want. Just by crossing the immediate options I couldn't bring myself to choose off the list, but it's more progress than being entirely stuck in place.

It takes me almost two hours to drive to the very end of Cape Cod. The hotel where all the wedding guests are staying is located right on the water. I can smell the ocean as soon as I step out of the car. I inhale deeply.

"Keys, miss?"

I hand my car keys over to the valet, and follow the bellhop who's already grabbed my luggage inside the hotel to check in.

"Eleanor!" I've barely stepped inside the lobby when Eliza rushes over to me, with Paige close behind. "Thank goodness you're finally here! I haven't seen you all week."

"I know. Work's been crazy," I reply, as I hug first her, and then Paige.

Always my excuse. Work, work, work.

"And… I needed some time to myself. William and I are over."

"What?" Eliza gasps. "Oh my God, you should have told me sooner! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." I smile tightly. "It wasn't meant to be."

"What happened?" Paige asks.

"I told him I couldn't marry him."

"He took it well?" She smirks slightly.

"Not really."

"I'm proud of you," Eliza surprises me by saying, giving me another tight hug. "It couldn't have been easy, and I know you wouldn't have ended things unless you were sure it was the right thing to do."

"Thanks, Eliza. I'm really fine, though. This is your wedding! We should be celebrating."

"Okay, but if you want to talk, promise me you'll say something."

"I promise," I reply. "Let me go check in."

"Oh, I already checked you in," Eliza responds. "And grabbed your gift bag." She grins. "Not a bad haul, if I do say so myself."

She loops her arm through mine and starts pulling me through the lobby toward the elevator. There's a fancy bar on the far side of the lobby that looks right out over the ocean. Sandy shore stretches into blue waves only interrupted by a distant striped lighthouse.

"So… where's everyone else?" I ask, as we wait for the elevator to arrive.

"Jessica's resting, Brooke's down on the beach, Lisa—" Eliza starts.

"Ryder's not here yet," Paige interrupts.

Eliza stares at her; I glare.

"You can pretend that's not who you were asking about all you want, but I'm not going to," Paige informs me.

I don't say anything. Now isn't the time to get into it. I let them lead me upstairs to my room, chattering about the wedding the whole time. It's a

welcome distraction that continues right up to the rehearsal dinner, which is taking place in the barrel room. I had no idea what that meant when Paige informed me about the choice of venue, until I entered the winery where the wedding is taking place tomorrow and realized it's literally just a room filled with barrels of wine. Which means there's no shortage of it served with dinner, and I definitely take advantage. Especially since Ryder is seated directly across from me. I thought seeing him as a newly single woman would feel different, but it doesn't. Being engaged to someone else didn't do a whole lot to curb my feelings for him, if I'm being totally honest.

Jessica's seated to my left, and I spend most of the meal catching up with her. And also learning far more about pregnancy than I ever wanted to know. I know I'm nowhere near ready to have kids but hearing her talk about nurseries and names along with swollen ankles and insomnia sends some pangs of longing through me. I thought I was close to that, and now I'm not. My close friends are starting to get married, have kids, and I'm completely alone.

But at least I'm not the only one. Jessica's husband asks Ryder about Lily during dessert, and I studiously avoid glancing his way after I hear him reply they broke up. Based on the conversation we had at the fireworks I was expecting it. Knowing he's single makes me contemplate how—if—I should let him know I am now as well.

Dinner ends, and people start to trickle off for the evening. I get into a long conversation with Eliza's mother, and by the time it's finished almost everyone has departed the barrel room. There's a bus that runs between the vineyard and the hotel, and I have it to myself on the return trip. I lean my forehead against the cool window, staring out of it. All I can see is my own reflection. Then, water begins dripping down it. The wedding tomorrow is outside, so I sincerely hope this is just a passing shower.

The bus deposits me back at the hotel, and I cross stones darkened by rain to enter the lobby. My heels squeak and slide on the glassy floor as I cross the lobby. Raucous laughter sounds, and I glance over at the bar. It's occupied by Tommy and his groomsmen, but I'm only focused on one guy. Ryder turns his gaze on me just in time to watch me slip and almost lose my balance. One of the doormen races over. I wave him off.

"I'm totally fine." I laugh. Okay, also slightly buzzed. "Really. It rained, and these shoes aren't great for rain." I pull my heels off. "Problem solved."

I turn to head for the elevator, and falter slightly when I realize there's someone blocking my way. I move to go around him, and wobble slightly.

"You're drunk?" Ryder doesn't sound impressed.

"No," I state firmly. "It's raining out. The floors are slippery."

"Huh." Ryder reaches out and puts his arm around my waist, propelling me forward. His touch is gentle; his movements are not.

"Isn't this the sort of shit your fiancé is supposed to do?" Ryder grumbles as we reach the elevator doors.

The best opening I could hope for. "Probably." I steel myself to say what it's taken me three glasses of wine to consider telling him. "If I had one."

He stiffens next to me. "What do you mean, 'if you had one'?"

"If I had a fiancé, I would expect him to drag me back to my room. But I don't, so I was planning to haul myself up there until you came along."

"You had a fight with William?"

"Not a fight." I look away. "I just told him I couldn't marry him."

"Why?" Ryder asks bluntly.

With anyone else I'd tell them to mind their own business. "I'm not in love with him," I reply honestly, continuing to study the console of elevator buttons.

"You were going to marry someone you didn't love?"

"I thought I did."

Ryder doesn't say anything as the doors slide open and we walk into the elevator. Or when we walk out into the carpeted hallway. I don't stumble and he doesn't offer any assistance. This conversation is rapidly sobering me up.

We reach 719. "This is me."

"I'm sorry to hear about you and William."

"Are you?" I challenge, finally looking at him. Ryder appears perfectly at ease, and it pisses me off.

"Yeah, I am." He appears sincere, but I don't fully believe him. You don't have a past like ours and plan to send annual holiday cards to each other's future families. We're the raw, festering wound that never fully heals.

"I don't believe you," I inform him. "I think it bothered you that I was marrying him. You obviously didn't like him. You barely spoke to him on the Fourth."

“That had nothing to do with you. There just wasn’t much to like.”

I lean against the doorframe and snort. “No one else seemed to think so.”

“Well, if he’s so perfect, maybe you should marry him.”

“I probably should,” I agree. “You didn’t ask me why I’m not in love with him.”

“I don’t need to. Either you are or you’re not.”

“Did you love me?”

All emotion leaves his face. Ryder does a spot-on imitation of a blank slate. I don’t think he’s going to answer. “Does it matter? It was a long time ago, Elle.” A response; not an answer.

“It matters to me.”

“It shouldn’t,” he snaps.

“Too fucking bad,” I retort. “Don’t you think about us? The treehouse? How different things might have been if—”

He kisses me, shoving me against the wooden door and pressing against me. A metal seven, one, and nine press into my spine. And I’m suddenly seventeen again. I’ve spent the last seven years convincing myself the passion between us was just first love. That I was young and naive, and he was the hot guy I wasn’t supposed to have, so that’s why I could never get enough of him. I’m not sure I ever fully believed it. Seeing him again cracked my reasoning. This is smashing it wide open. Because I’ve kissed a lot of guys since the last time I kissed Ryder James, and the heat and excitement and euphoria coursing through me right now didn’t happen with a single one of them.

And *he* is the one who kissed *me*.

“Fucking hell.” He pulls back, as if simultaneously realizing the same thing.

I grin, wide and obnoxious. I’m pretty sure he was expecting me to yell at him, because my response definitely takes him off guard.

“Why did you stop?”

“Stop what?”

If he’s hoping to pretend that didn’t just occur, it’s not going to happen. “Kissing me.”

Ryder sighs. “Because I shouldn’t have started. I thought it would shut you up.”

“Feel free to shut me up some more.”

“That’s a terrible idea. I’m going to bed.” Ryder turns, and I grab his arm without thinking. He tenses, and I drop it.

“Sleep in mine.”

He laughs, but it’s not an amused sound. It’s demeaning. Incredulous. “Absolutely not.”

“Why not? It’s a wedding. Don’t people normally hook up at these? We’re both single.”

Ryder studies me, a look of total disbelief on his face. “How drunk are you? Do you need some water?”

He’s not taking me seriously, and it pisses me off. “You’re not attracted to me anymore? Fine, I’ll go find someone else.” I start to stalk past him, but he stops me, just like I knew—hoped—he would.

“Go to bed, *Eleanor*.”

“You’re not the boss of me, *Ryder*. Thought you didn’t care who I’m with?”

“I don’t,” he insists, but this time he doesn’t totally succeed at sounding sincere.

“Great. I want to have sex, and you’re not interested. I’m going wide with the offer.”

Ryder laughs disbelievingly. “Fuck, Elle. You’re blackmailing me into having sex with you?”

“That’s a cynical way of looking at it. Plus, it implies you *would* care if I found someone else.” Ryder doesn’t answer me. He just stares at me. Long enough I start to squirm. “Whatever,” I mutter. “Good night.”

I turn, sticking my keycard in the slot and opening the door once it beeps. But when I turn back around to shut the door, Ryder is still standing there. Even without the distinctive tic of his jaw, I can tell he’s mad. And deliberating something. I learn what when he steps inside the room and shuts the door behind him.

“Take your clothes off and get on the bed,” Ryder demands. Now, it’s my turn to stare. I didn’t think there was any chance he would agree to have sex with me.

Zero.

Nada.

Zip.

Absolute zilch.

I’m torn between celebrating and panicking as I look at him.

“Elle!”

“You’re not getting undressed,” I point out. Of the two of us, I’ve definitely been the more vulnerable tonight. Not that that’s anything new. Getting naked while he stands there fully dressed feels like an exacerbation of the power differential between us.

“I don’t need to.”

I’m about to protest when he unbuckles his belt, unzips his pants, and pulls out his dick. His cock is already hard. Guess that answers the *Is he still attracted to me?* question. Fire simmers in my veins, burning away any anxiety or insecurity.

I hold his gaze as I untie the sash of my dress and let it flutter to the floor. As I sweep my hair over one shoulder and unbutton the back of my dress before dragging down the zipper. It slides to the floor in a silken heap.

Ryder advances, close enough the bulbous head of his length pokes me in the belly. Wetness pools between my legs, and I have to bite on my bottom lip to keep from moaning out loud. “Get on your hands and knees,” he tells me, pushing me in the direction of the bed.

Our sex life in high school was intense, but this demanding, dominant side of Ryder is new.

I like it.

A lot.

Every other guy I’ve ever been with has always treated me like a delicate flower formed from glass. With reverence. Respect. None of that’s bad, but it’s never elicited the flood of lust I’m currently drowning in.

I scramble on the bed eagerly, and I think I catch Ryder smirking. Acting like fucking him is the most exciting thing to ever happen to me is probably not terrible for his ego.

He lines up behind me and yanks my thong down, and this time I *do* moan.

There’s the crinkle of a wrapper.

Anticipation races through me with all of the subtly of a riptide. I’m adrift and unmoored to anything but this moment. I know it’s coming, but I still gasp when Ryder shoves inside me. I don’t need to ask him to move. He grabs my hips and starts rutting.

I close my eyes and lose myself to sensation, absorbing the force of his thrusts and pushing back against him. Each shove sends me close to heaven.

It usually takes a while for me to orgasm, especially without any additional stimulation. All Ryder's doing is holding my hips.

But the knowledge it *is* Ryder grabbing my waist and driving into me is apparently all my body needs. He's plunging into me so quickly the swell of ecstasy takes me off guard.

I chant his name as I drown in bliss, barely managing to stay on my hands and knees. He keeps moving as I contract around him, protracting the pleasure. His grip on me tightens, and that's how I know he's coming too.

I collapse on the bed, rolling over so I can finally look at him.

I know the choice of sexual position was a deliberate one on his part.

I sit up and grab his tie, pulling him back down on the bed with me. He could fight me, but he doesn't.

"Better than high school?" I ask when he's down beside me.

I think he was expecting me to say something serious, because the smile flashes before he can stop it.

"Different," he answers.

"How diplomatic." I roll my eyes, but the room is dim enough I'm not sure if he can tell.

"For you?"

"Well, we had a lot of sex in high school. It would be helpful to have another time now to compare it to…" I let my voice trail off suggestively.

Once again, I've caught him off guard, and I take advantage. I roll on top of him, pulling off the used condom. "Do you have another one?" I ask him.

"Pretty sure this was exactly what Tommy had in mind when he passed out party favors," Ryder responds, pulling a strip of condoms out of his pocket.

"Probably," I agree, ripping one off and opening it. He groans when I roll it on, his dick hardening in my hand. I stroke him a couple more times, and then lower myself down on his substantial length. He feels even bigger from this angle.

Maybe it's because those green eyes are assessing me as I slip down, inch by inch. I meet his gaze, biting my bottom lip when he's fully seated inside me.

Heat flares in his gaze as I slowly rotate my hips.

I lean forward. My long hair falls around us, curtaining off the rest of the world. "Does that feel good?" I whisper, as I ghost my lips across his.

“It would feel better if you moved.”

I laugh softly. “Oh, yeah?”

His hands slide down my sides and settle back on my waist. “Yeah,” he breathes back.

I start to move, and his hands trail back up, leaving goosebumps in their wake. One deft motion, and my bra droops forward. Ryder doesn’t bother fully removing it, he just slips his hands around to the front of my chest. I moan when he starts playing with my breasts, starting to move my hips again. The delicious friction of his dick sliding in and out of me sends tingles racing along my nerve endings.

Ryder groans, and I kiss him. Really kiss him. Despite my body’s response to it, the kiss in the hallway was hardly more than a peck. This is tongue and urgency and need. Our mouths are just as greedy as the rest of our bodies.

He rolls us so he’s hovering over me, changing the angle inside of me again. He rams into me over and over again, obviously sick of my slower pace, and I never want it to end.

I ease my hands under his shirt and up his back.

We freeze simultaneously.

Me, because rather than the smooth skin I was expecting to encounter, my right palm is brushing against a raised ridge that feels an awful lot like a scar.

Ryder, because I’m certain this is the reason he kept most of his clothes on.

“Ry—” I start, feeling a little sick as I run through some scenarios for how he might have gotten such a deep, ugly cut. I’ve spent a lot of time imagining the psychological damage prison might have inflicted on him. I never considered he might bear physical evidence of it as well.

“Don’t.” His voice cuts through the tender moment we were enjoying like the crack of a whip: brisk and sharp.

“I just—” Questions he refuses to answer start swirling in my head. *Why, Ryder? Why did you do it? Why did you let this happen?*

“Elle. Stop talking or I’ll leave.” I know he will, and that's the only reason I quite literally bite my tongue. I let my hands fall to the bed, and he starts moving again. The pressure previously building dissipated, but a few more strokes is all it takes for it to return.

I stare up at him, knowing pity and pain and curiosity are all evident on my face.

Ryder swears and looks away, pumping into me faster and faster. Sweat builds between our bodies as we fall apart together. As soon as his dick stops jerking, Ryder pulls out of me. I'm half-expecting him to leap up and be out the door, but he rolls over onto the bed beside me, breathing heavily.

"It feels the same," I say.

"What?" he asks, rather than chiding me for breaking his no-talking rule.

"Sex with you. It feels the same as it did in high school."

"Sorry to disappoint."

"You didn't, Ryder." The words are innocuous enough, but my voice is teeming with naked honesty. I know what it'll prompt before it happens. Ryder rises off the bed, zips up his pants, and strides across the room.

He's out the door in seconds.

Leaving me.

Again.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Thank you so much for everything, Elle." Eliza throws her arms around me and squeezes. I return the hug. "For being here. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"You're my best friend. Of course I'm here."

"I know." She pulls back, and chews on her bottom lip nervously. "It's just—with Ryder…" I feel my face shutter to expressionless as soon as she says his name. "I know it hasn't been easy."

"I'm fine." I wave her words away like they're unnecessary. Like the various wedding events that have forced me to spend time around Ryder haven't shredded my heart into bleeding strips of muscle.

I must be a better actress than I thought, because Eliza seems convinced I really am fine. Maybe I should write a self-help book. *How to Appear Like You're Really Over the Ex You Share a Luggage Cart's Worth of Baggage With at a Wedding*. It would be a better use of my law degree than dodging phone calls from potential employers asking whether I'm accepting their job offer or not.

Eliza heads off to talk to more of her guests, and I go back to picking at my dinner as I listen to Paige and Jessica gush over how beautiful the wedding was. It was gorgeous. Last night's rain cleared into a sunny, dry day that served as the perfect backdrop for the rows of vines Tommy and Eliza got married in front of. The lines of grapes are mostly hidden now, barely illuminated by the strands of lights dripping down the sides of the outdoor pavilion where the reception is taking place.

"Is the chicken bad?" Paige asks me.

“What? No, it’s good,” I reply, belatedly realizing her conversation with Jessica ended and I've just been sitting here staring off into space.

“You’ve barely eaten it. I won't tell Eliza.”

I laugh. “Seriously, it’s good. I’m just not really hungry. I drank too much last night, and I’ve been feeling nauseous all day.”

“I haven’t had a drop of alcohol in eight months, and I’ve felt nauseous all day,” Jessica says.

“I’m pretty sure you’ve put me off having children for another five years,” I tell her, and she laughs.

“People say you forget this part.”

“Yeah, well—” Sixpence None the Richer’s “Kiss Me” starts to play, and I freeze. My stupid seventeen-year-old self never imagined a world where I might hear those opening chords with Ryder James in the same room, and not be able to kiss him. My twenty-four-year-old self is stuck with the consequences.

“Eleanor? Eleanor!” I finally focus on Jessica again.

“Yes?”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I take a bite of chicken and wash it down with more wine.

Mike ambles over to us. “Anyone want to dance? The grandmas keep grabbing me.”

We all laugh. “Sure,” I surprise myself by saying. I catch Paige nodding approvingly. I wonder if she’d feel the same way if she knew I’m only doing it to hold it together for the duration of this song.

“You good, Clarke?” Mike asks as we start to sway.

I chuckle and am well aware it sounds off-balance. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You're single now?”

“Uh, yes.” I’ve only told Paige, Jessica, and Eliza—and Ryder—about me and William, but I’m not really surprised the news has already circulated around.

“You know, I was thinking we should—”

I look at him for the first time, and he bursts out laughing. “I’m just kidding. I make some dumb choices. I’m not suicidal enough to step on the minefield that’s you and James.”

“There’s *nothing* between me and Ryder,” I reply emphatically.

“Save that line for him.”

I scoff. “That *is* his line.”

“And he’s probably the last person you should listen to when it comes to his feelings for you.”

“He’s also the only person who actually knows how he feels.”

Mike shrugs. “So keep pushing him.”

“That has *not* gone well in the past,” I inform him.

“But it’s awfully entertaining for the rest of us.” Mike grins. “Just ask him to dance, the way I just asked you. Come on.” Without even waiting for the song to end, he pulls me off the dance floor and over to the table where Ryder is sitting with a bunch of other guys from Fernwood.

I’m insanely tempted to chicken out as we near him, but Mike is literally propelling me forward. Not very much I can do about it. We reach the table, and Ryder glances up. First at Mike, then at me. He’s totally expressionless; I can’t read a single thing. I summon every ounce of confidence I can muster and paste a smile on my face. “Want to dance?”

“I can’t. I promised Tommy I’d help him out with something.”

Bullshit. But I don’t say it. The sympathetic stares are bad enough.

To Ryder’s credit, he follows through on the lie, heading over to Tommy’s side.

I head for the bar. Mike follows me. “Sorry,” he apologizes.

“Not your fault.” I sigh. I mean it. I know Ryder’s rebuff just now was his way of telling me last night didn’t change anything between us. Well, message fucking received.

“I really thought he’d—”

“It’s fine, Mike.” He catches the I-really-don’t-want-to-talk-about-it in my tone.

“Promise I’ll never take up motivational speaking,” he tells me.

I laugh. “Good.” Then I glance over at the dance floor, and any humor is immediately sapped from my body. Because Ryder is now dancing with a beautiful blonde. I turn back to the bar and take a healthy swig of my freshly made drink. Mike doesn’t say anything, but I know he saw him too.

How many times can the same person break your heart? Because Ryder is definitely striving for a world record. Or maybe I am.

I hate that I keep handing my heart to him. Again and again and again.

I hate that he keeps breaking it.

I hate that half the time he doesn’t mean to.

Most of all, I hate that I still love him a lot more than I hate him.

We disembark from the air-conditioned bus into the humid night. Paige yawns and drapes her arm around my shoulders.

"I want ice cream," she informs me.

I roll my eyes. Three minutes ago, it was a cheeseburger.

"Oh, look! There everyone is."

Paige takes off to the right, and I have no choice but to follow her down the path that leads to the beach. Sure enough, the entire wedding party is on the beach. Paige tosses her heels into the sand.

"Seriously, Eliza? You ditched us at your own reception?"

Eliza grins. "You two were busy. We were headed back to the hotel. Then, we just got sidetracked."

"Uh-huh." Paige plops down in the sand, and I internally groan.

"I thought you wanted to head back to the hotel?" I ask pointedly.

"That's before I knew everyone is hanging out here. Come on, you don't have to head to work early in the morning, for once."

"You know what? You're right," I decide. "Why don't we go get more drinks?"

"I'm not sure if that's…"

"I'll be right back!"

I turn and come face to face with Ryder.

"Oh. Hey." The greeting every girl hopes for.

"Hi." I inject a lot into the single syllable.

"You good?"

"Do I not seem good?" I retort.

"No, you seem mad. Are you drunk?"

"I can only be mad if I'm drunk?"

"No, it just seems to be when you're more… expressive."

I let out a hollow laugh. "I can't believe the word *expressive* is even in your vocabulary."

Right on cue, his jaw starts ticking.

"Hey, I'll go up to the bar with you," Paige offers, rising from the sand. She's clearly trying to diffuse the tension emanating off me.

But I'm sick of simmering in jealousy and anger and unrequited love. Emotions currently swimming around with a healthy helping of alcohol courtesy of the open bar. And the dam that's held ever since the morning

Lily Sampson called is history. It's leaked since that day, some more than others, but it bursts now.

"And you know what else? Fuck you, Ryder Jordan James."

Maybe the self-help book wouldn't be a good idea, after all. Bye-bye holding it together. The words keep coming, spilling out of me in a flood. Unchecked and unfiltered.

"Fuck. You," I spit the words like arrows. "In case you're still not clear, I'm in love with you. Still. Again. But I can't keep doing this, Ryder. You can't avoid me and then tell me you thought about how you'd propose. You can't sleep with me and then ignore me. I know part of it's on me. I haven't handled shit well. But some of it's on you, too. Most of it, actually."

I step forward and shove his chest, the pain building to the point I need to expel it physically.

"Because you haven't done *anything*. You haven't explained *anything*. You give me scraps, and I'm so in love with you I take them. I spend hours and hours looking through police reports trying to make Liam pay. I started a charity so your mom didn't have to sleep with sleazy men to pay for her drugs. I got Christopher a scholarship so he could go to the best college on the East Coast for free. I broke up with an amazing guy because I couldn't marry him while I still feel this way about you. And what have you done? Absolutely *nothing*. I have no idea how you feel about me, Ryder!"

I'm crying now, and I don't even care.

"I don't know if anything I've done matters to you. If *I* matter to you. I try to figure it out, and you shut me down. Or walk away. And I'd wait and be patient, except for the fact you stole seven years from us, and you won't even tell me why!"

Silence.

Complete, total, impenetrable silence.

From Ryder.

From all of our friends who just watched my emotional meltdown.

Even the ocean seems to quiet to emphasize the lack of other sound.

I stare at Ryder. He looks back at me, as impassive and hard to read as ever. Nothing. He's still giving me absolutely nothing.

Water keeps tricking down my cheeks, and I let it.

I let him see how much I meant it.

All of it.

“I can’t—I can’t keep doing this, Ryder,” I whisper. “Either you do, or you don’t.”

I spin and start walking away, not wanting to register anyone else’s reaction to my emotional upheaval.

Leaving Ryder standing stone-faced.

Hoping he knows the lack of expression is responsible for a fresh fissure in the organ that’s a real glutton for punishment where he’s concerned.

I pull it together to walk through the lobby, and then collapse on my bed as soon as I’m back in my room. There’s a knock on the door a couple minutes later. I haul myself up and peek through the peephole. I swipe at my cheeks a few times before I open the door, well aware I look like a complete mess.

Tommy studies me for a minute.

“I’m so sorry,” I blurt. “That was totally inappropriate. It’s your wedding. I never should have—”

“Are you okay?” Tommy cuts me off.

“Yup. Peachy.” I try and fail to smile.

Tommy mutters something that sounds a lot like *I told him so*. “Look. Ryder’s like a brother to me. I’ll always have his back. But everything you said to him earlier? He needed to hear that. Pretty sure you being engaged was exactly what he was hoping for.” He catches the flash of pain on my face. “Not because he doesn’t care, Elle. I mean, if you knew—The point is, you moving on meant he didn’t have any choices. Now he has some. Give him a chance to make the right ones.”

“I’ve given him nothing *but* chances, Tommy.”

“That’s what we do for the people we love, right?”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I pick up my legal pad and start out of the conference room, tapping a pen against the paper in time with each step.

"Hi, Eleanor." Josh Andrews, one of the junior partners, falls into step beside me. "How have you been?"

"Good, Josh. How about you?"

"Not bad, not bad."

"Great."

There's a pause. We've never done more than exchange pleasantries before. This is uncharted territory.

"I was sorry to hear about you and William."

"Thanks. Good to know we surpassed associate-level gossip."

Josh smiles. "Yeah… nothing to worry about there."

"That's what I figured." It's not that big of a firm, and both our fathers work here. People were bound to talk about mine and William's break-up. "Probably why you're not supposed to date co-workers." I let out a small, wry laugh.

"So, you'd say you're opposed to dating co-workers now?" Josh asks. I'm hoping I'm imagining the flirtatious tone in his voice, but when I glance over, he's sporting a sly smirk.

"Yeah. I'd say I'm pretty opposed," I reply, giving him an apologetic smile.

"Maybe you haven't met the right co-worker yet." His answering smile is confident.

I've learned my lesson about not being up-front with people. "I don't think that's it." My tone is polite, but firm.

We round the corner that leads to the summer associate cubicles, and I stall in place. Josh gives me a questioning look. He hasn't noticed the figure leaning against the fourth one down. Against *my* cubicle.

"Nice talking to you, Josh," I say robotically. My eyes are locked on the tall frame looking down at the papers on my desk. I don't wait to see if Josh replies. I walk forward hesitantly, right past William's accusing eyes.

"What are you doing here?" I ask as soon as I reach him.

Ryder straightens and turns. He doesn't say anything at first, just studies me. I'm well aware I don't look great. It's been five days since Eliza and Tommy's wedding. Since I woke up early, heaped apologies on both of them, and then left the hotel two hours before the post-wedding brunch was set to start to avoid seeing anyone else. I've spent most of the past few days here, returning home only to sleep. Or rather, to toss and turn and replay the words I screamed at him in an endless loop in my head. I don't regret what I said. I do wish it had gone down in private. I've gotten an endless stream of texts from my friends checking in on me ever since. I also wish Ryder had said a single thing in response.

"Here." Ryder holds the stack of manilla folders he's holding out for me. I accept them hesitantly. They're worn. Faded. Scribbled on. Torn.

"What is this?" None of them are clearly labeled.

"My case file. All of it they'd give to me, at least."

I stare at him. "What? Why?"

He shrugs. "You were right. You deserve to know. But—" His expression hardens. "It's not going to change anything, okay?"

"I don't want to read a police report." I hold the papers back out to him.

A muscle works in his jaw as he takes them. "Have you or have you not been badgering me about telling you what happened that night for the past three months?"

"Yeah. *You* telling me what happened. Not a stack of folders." I'm done treating Ryder like a traumatized animal. I'm no longer desperate for any bit of affection or acknowledgement from him. If he refuses it will just make it easier to finally move on. I hope.

He seems to realize the same, and his jawline moves furiously. "Fine."

My heart leaps, but I take a page out of his book and keep my expression inscrutable. "Fine."

"Not here."

He wants to be able to bolt if this goes badly. I consider arguing, but don't. This is a conversation best had in a neutral space.

"Okay. Just let me grab my stuff." I dump the legal pads I'm holding on my desk and retrieve my purse from the floor, double-checking my phone is inside. "Ready."

Ryder's already in motion, heading in the direction of the elevators. I roll my eyes and follow. He's got the button pushed by the time I reach him.

"How did you get up here?" I ask. "They're supposed to call up with any visitors."

Ryder holds up the stack of folders. "Said I was a messenger from Lane, Street, and Avenue and had an urgent delivery for you."

I wasn't planning to smile, but it slips out anyway. "Lane, Street, and Avenue? What's your address?"

"We're centrally located on I Didn't Think He'd Ask That Drive."

I roll my eyes as the elevator dings and we step inside. "Lobby, please," I tell the attendant.

The descent down to the lobby is silent. The only sound is the wild beat of my heart. It whooshes in my ears. Answers. I'm about to get answers. We walk through the lobby side by side. My heels click on the marble. Then, we're outside. On the busy, hot street. There's a hot dog cart parked just outside the building's entrance, and the scent of cooked meat permeates the air. Ryder sets off for the raised bed of flowers that lines the entrance to the building, and I trail after him. He stops once he reaches the cement edge, and I stall to a halt as well. Sweat drips down my spine, both in response to the heat and what is about to happen.

"What do you remember? About that night?" Ryder asks without preamble. When not ardently attempting to avoid a subject, he's pretty direct.

I glance at him and then back to the sidewalk. "Not… much. I was annoyed with you, from the argument we had about you playing football. For not telling me you'd decided to play. I drank more than I normally did. We flirted. Danced."

A small, involuntary smile twists my lips upward. Even after all the horrible things that followed, those moments still matter to me.

"I told you to meet me upstairs," I whisper, remembering this recollection doesn't have a happy ending. "I ran into Paige and then

Danielle. Got delayed. Someone yelled the cops were here. Things got chaotic, and then that's all there was. Chaos."

"I went upstairs to wait for you," Ryder tells me. He clears his throat, and I tense, reacting to what I know is coming. "I opened the door to one of the bedrooms, and Liam was on top of her. I—" He clears his throat again. "Do you remember what you were wearing that night?"

A sickly, heavy realization slithers its way into my stomach. "You thought it was me," I whisper.

Ryder nods. "There was just one lamp on. I couldn't really see her. I just saw that dress and I—I lost it. I got in a couple good punches before I even realized it was Liam. One of the football guys—Steve—heard the commotion and came in. Kennedy wasn't even conscious. It was pretty obvious what had happened to her. Other people started coming in, trying to wake her up. The cops showed up, and it was chaos for a bit. Someone told them Steve, Liam, and I were the ones in the room with her. We got taken to the station. I was there for hours until a couple of detectives came in. Started asking me all these questions about Kennedy: how I knew her, if we'd ever had sex, stuff like that. That's when I realized they thought I'd done it. They told me both Steve and Liam said they'd seen me assaulting her. They also had all these files on me, shit from Florida. They told me no one would believe I hadn't done it, and I believed them."

"I would have believed you."

"I know. It wouldn't have changed anything. Would have only dragged you into it."

"There was a rape kit, Ryder!"

"Because physical evidence always gets tested? You're a lawyer, Elle, come on."

"You didn't even want to try?"

"I'd done plenty of illegal shit, Elle. It probably would have caught up with me one way or the other."

"If they'd had any evidence of that they would have charged you with that, too."

"Maybe," Ryder admits. "I didn't know if they did or didn't. Wasn't exactly in a position to be making demands."

"So you just gave up."

"I could have rolled the dice and gotten forty, or take the ten."

"But you didn't do it!" I explode.

“I spent my whole life being told I’d probably end up in prison, Elle. The truth doesn’t always matter in a courtroom. It was my decision, and I can’t change it.”

“You decided wrong.”

“It’s my life.”

“But it affected mine. A lot, Ryder. Then. Now.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that the other night.” And… apparently that’s the only response screaming at him on the sand is going to get me. Glad I didn’t opt for a subtler approach.

“That’s all you’re going to say?”

“What do you want me to say?”

I huff out a sigh that’s almost a sob. He meant it when he said it wouldn’t change anything. I told him I couldn’t move on until I knew the truth, and now that I do, I know he was right at all along.

How it happened doesn’t really matter. It happened and neither of us can change it.

I thought he needed to tell me in order for me to move on.

He already has.

“Nothing,” I answer. The solitary word hovers between us. “I don’t need you to say anything at all.”

I turn to start walking away, but Ryder surprises me by grabbing my arm. “Elle…”

I whirl back around. “Do you blame me? For being the reason you were at that party? For asking you to meet me upstairs? For being the reason Liam had it out for you? For not visiting you in jail?”

Ryder’s head snaps back. “What? No. Of course not.”

“Then why have you been pushing me away every chance you get?”

“You were engaged.”

“I’m not anymore.”

“Our lives are too different. Especially now.”

“What about what I told you at the beach?”

This time I get a reaction. Ryder pulls in a shaky breath accompanied by a flash of what looks an awful lot like uncertainty in his green eyes.

So, I press on. “You broke my heart. Maybe that means you’re the only one who can put it back together again.”

“Or it means I’m the last person who should.” Pressed too far, clearly.

“Shouldn’t that be *my* decision to make?”

I’m not sure why Ryder stopped me from leaving a minute ago, but I’m fairly certain he’s regretting it right now. I’m bracing myself for another rejection, so I’m surprised when he finally responds. “I don’t know.”

But it’s not enough. I yank my arm out of his grip. “Well, I’m sick of waiting for you to figure it out.”

I stride back toward the entrance to the building.

Wishing I wasn’t so reluctant to leave.

The entirety of my afternoon is taken up by a deposition that stretches into the early hours of the evening. I’m prepared for it, but I go off-script for several of the questions I ask. Oftentimes depositions are a predictable recitation of facts we already know, but the ones with curveballs are my favorite. I’m good at thinking on my feet, and the third-year associate I was partnered with compliments me as we leave the conference room we’ve spent the past eight hours in.

“Thanks, Mary,” I reply. “Have a good night.”

“You, too, Eleanor.”

I retrieve my belongings from my cubicle and head for the elevators. I try not to think about standing here with Ryder this morning as I wait for the doors to open. My phone buzzes in my bag, and I pull it out. It’s Paige.

“Hey, how are you?”

“Shitty.” I laugh. “You?”

“Um, I feel like I should say fucking terrible to stay on this depressing kick with you, but I actually met a really cute guy at Campbell last night, so pretty good.”

“I saw Ryder earlier.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, he came to the office, actually.”

“To grovel, I hope.”

“I was the one who exploded on him at the beach, Paige.”

“One of your finer moments.”

“Gee, thanks,” I reply.

“I’m serious. You had no problem telling him off in high school, but ever since he’s gotten back you haven’t confronted him at all. Just given

him longing stares."

"Yeah, you're doing a *great* job at making me feel better."

"So… the conversation didn't go well?"

"He brought his case file. Told me what happened."

"And?!"

"He was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Liam lied to the police. Steve Hastings backed him up. The cops had some file from other stuff he'd done. Threatened him with other charges. He… he was just a kid, Paige."

"Yeah, I know," she replies.

"I guess I thought when he told me it would all make sense. That it wasn't just that Liam is capable of even worse things than I ever imagined and if we'd stayed downstairs, it never would have happened."

Paige is silent. "So… that's it?"

"That's it," I confirm as I step inside the elevator. "I told him how I feel."

"Actually, you shouted it at an impressive volume using swear words I didn't even know were in your vocabulary."

"Right. Thanks for that clarification," I droll.

"Are you home? I can come over for a bit."

"No, I'm leaving the office right now." I step out into the parking garage.

I can practically hear Paige rolling her eyes through the phone. "Right. Of course."

"Do you want to meet at NoMad?"

"Eleanor Clarke? Suggesting we go out drinking? On a weeknight? Hell yeah, I'm in."

I smile. "Okay. I'll meet you there in twenty minutes."

Scout starts barking excitedly as soon as we stumble through the front door. I had the dog walker walk and feed him earlier, but he hasn't seen me all day. I sprawl down right in the entryway, letting him climb and lick all over me.

"Gross," Paige comments. "That mutt is not sleeping in bed with us."

"Okay," I agree.

She rolls her eyes. We both know he will be.

The two of us trip and slip our way up the stairs into my bedroom. I'm too tired and tipsy to do anything more than wash my face and brush my teeth before falling into bed, still in the sheath dress I wore to work this morning. Paige strips off her top and jeans and drops down beside me in her underwear. She smiles at me drunkenly.

"You're going to be all right, Eleanor Clarke. You know that, right?"

"Yeah," I smile back. "I know that."

"Good." Paige lies down beside me. "Now keep the dog on your side of the bed."

The last thing I can remember before falling asleep is laughing.

A blaring alarm wakes me up the following morning.

"Shit." I sit straight up in bed, shoving Paige's arm off me. Her preferred sleeping position is starfish. I wonder how her endless slew of one-night stands feel about it.

I hop out of bed, wincing as I stand. Right. That's why I don't usually have three drinks on a weeknight. I sprint for the shower. Being doused by hot water for ten minutes helps, but I don't have time to prolong it. I down a couple painkillers between brushing my teeth, styling my hair, and applying a light layer of make-up.

Paige is sitting up in bed petting Scout when I emerge into my bedroom wrapped in a towel. She eyes me. "How are you feeling?"

"Headache and I'd kill for two more hours of sleep." Pretty sure she meant emotionally, but she lets my answer slide with a nod before heading into the bathroom.

I head into my walk-in closet to change into a dress and heels.

"Coffee?" I ask the bathroom door as I pass it.

"Please!" Paige calls back.

I rush downstairs, starting the espresso machine as I pull a blazer on over my dress. I let Scout out in the backyard, feed him breakfast, and then pour the coffee into two mugs. Paige is ambling down the stairs as I walk into the entryway, cups in hand. I hand her one as I grab my bag and make sure I have everything.

“Ready?”

“Do you give all your one-night stands the boot like this?” Paige teases as she grabs her purse from the hook by the door. I’m impressed she had the presence of mind to actually hang it up last night.

“Just my favorites,” I smile at her as I open the front door and head out on the front stoop. And then freeze. Paige’s sharp intake of breath tells me she’s right behind me.

I descend the stairs slowly.

“Morning.” Ryder gives me a small smile. Not the detached one I usually get. This one has a hint of emotion. Also a touch of nerves, if I’m reading it right.

“Morning?” It comes out like a question. Because the way we left things yesterday did not leave me with the impression he’d be casually stopping by anytime soon. Or ever.

“I can’t stay for very long. I’ve got work. Guessing you do too.” He eyes my blazer. “I just wanted to give you this.”

I register what he’s holding for the first time. He offers a brown paper bag out to me. I take it hesitantly, eyeing it like it might explode.

“Uh, thanks?” I shift my work bag so I have a hand free, unrolling the top of the bag so I can peek inside. The scent of fruit and butter hits me, and if I weren’t already motionless it probably would have made me so.

“I’m not sure if they’re edible,” Ryder warns. “I’m shit at baking, and neither Mom nor Chris were any help at all.”

I have to swallow several times before I can say anything. “You made me blueberry scones?” I whisper.

“Looks that way, doesn’t it?”

“Why?”

“Because you seem to be under the impression I’m not affected by our past, and this is the best way I could think of to prove you wrong.”

“Uh, Eleanor?” I startle, turning around to watch Paige descend from the stairs. She gives me and Ryder a small smirk. “Super sorry to interrupt, but I kind of feel like maybe I shouldn’t be standing here awkwardly watching this. So I’m going to go…”

I smile. “Yeah, okay.”

She gives me a quick hug, and Ryder another smile. “Good to see you, Ryder.”

“Yeah, you too, Paige,” he replies, stuffing his hands in his jeans pockets. She disappears down the street, but Ryder and I stay put, staring at each other.

He takes a deep breath. “You said I haven’t given you anything. And you were right. Because I didn’t think you’d want anything from me. I got out, and you were exactly where I expected you to be. You’d accomplished things. Met another guy. I thought maybe you’d have questions about what happened. But I wasn’t even sure of that. I figured you would have written me off a long time ago. Then, we spent that weekend together. It seemed like you were struggling, but with stuff that had nothing to do with me. That I was an escape, or a distraction, just like in high school.”

I laugh.

“What?” He’s clearly confused by my response.

“It’s just weird hearing you say that,” I respond. “I feel like I’ve spent the past couple months walking around wearing a shirt that says *I’m in love with Ryder James*.”

Ryder smirks, then sobers. “Well, I had no idea you felt that way until you told me on the beach. Kind of hard to miss it when it’s said at that volume.”

“Righttttt.” It’s going to be a while before I live the beach meltdown down. In my defense, alcohol and intense emotions were involved. Often a bad combination.

“And I didn’t realize until the Fourth you didn’t know how I felt about you. Feel about you. When you said I was humoring you…” He laughs. “Fuck, Elle. You really had no clue how far gone I was for you?”

I shake my head silently.

“I thought it was obvious, just like you said. Tommy and the rest of the guys certainly thought so.” He chuckles, obviously recalling jokes made at his expense. About his feelings for me.

“You never said anything.”

“Yeah, I know.” He rakes his hand through his hair, and I almost smile. “I was trying to play it cool, I guess. I figured we’d be temporary anyway. Thought I’d have a chance to say it later.” His hand drops. “Things worked out differently. Obviously.”

“You could say it now,” I suggest. Because he may be fessing up about high school, but he’s dancing around how he feels about me at this moment. Half-hearted honesty isn’t enough to move forward on.

“I’m in love with you, Eleanor Josephine Clarke. Pretty sure I have been ever since you kissed me in that treehouse while I was trying to explain Newton’s Third Law to you for the fourth time.”

I smirk and take a step forward. “You’re pretty sure, huh?”

“Completely certain, actually.” He picks up a piece of my hair and winds it around his pointer finger. “And it seems to get harder and harder to ignore every time I see you.”

“Are you going to stop trying to?” I ask.

“Yeah, it would be great if my mom and Chris would stop glaring at me all the time.”

I roll my eyes. Ryder grins, but then turns serious.

“I didn't know you started your charity just for her. Or about the scholarship.”

I shrug. “I didn’t tell you.”

Ryder’s phone buzzes in his pocket. He pulls it out and glances at the screen. I know what he’s about to say before the words leave his mouth. “I have to go.” He looks apologetic, at least.

“Yeah, I’m probably at least fifteen minutes late by now.”

Neither of us move.

“Thanks for these.” I wave the bag of scones. “You know I… thank you.”

“I thought—thought that maybe you might like to get some other food with me sometime.”

I raise both eyebrows. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

“Yeah,” Ryder confirms. “I am.”

After all we’ve been through, maybe I should have to think about my answer. Or maybe it’s because of all we’ve been through I know my answer immediately.

“Okay, I’ll go on a date with you, Ryder James.”

He smirks, but it transforms into the genuine, crooked grin that’s my favorite sight in the whole world. “Just wait until you see what I have planned.”

“Our last date consisted of you feeling me up in a treehouse. Pretty sure there’s nowhere to go from there but up.”

Ryder laughs. “Damn.”

“Are you going to kiss me before you go?”

“I was thinking about it,” he replies, still grinning.

“Oh, yeah? You were thinking about—” I’m cut off by the feel of his lips on mine. There’s none of the urgency and desperation of our last kiss. This one is a languid exploration. A reacquaintance.

I’m pressed against him, so I feel his phone vibrate. Again. And again.

“Shit,” he whispers against my lips. “I’ve really got to go. I’m sorry.”

“You’re going to come back, though. Right?” Vulnerability fills my voice, and I know it’s because I’ve got something to lose now.

His green gaze softens. “Right.” He bends down to give me one more soft kiss. “I’ll call you later. Okay?”

I nod. He smiles, then turns and starts down the street. I can see his truck parked a couple doors down from mine.

“Please don’t break my heart again,” I whisper.

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE

OceanofPDF.com

RYDER

"ELLE! Let's go!" I call, straightening from the wall I've been leaning against to check the time on my phone. Again.

"I'm almost ready," she shouts back.

"So… ten minutes?"

Her head pokes around the corner. "Fifteen at most." She gives me a sheepish smile.

I sigh. We've already blown through the extra hour I budgeted for this very reason. "You're sure there's nothing I can help with?"

"Nope. Just stand there and look handsome. Besides, you're the one who's going to have to carry it inside tonight!" She calls back.

"Can't wait," I grumble. Truth is, I really can't. I was terrified about reconciling with Elle for lots of reasons.

That we wouldn't be able to move beyond the past.

That things between us wouldn't be as good as I remembered them being in high school.

That she would regret allowing my return to bulldoze her life.

But most pressing was the fact I didn't want to stay in Massachusetts. And despite the other areas of her life in which she expressed discontent, Elle never mentioned any desire to move to me. I told her about the job in Maine at Tommy's bachelor party, but I didn't tell her I'd already taken it.

Our first date hadn't seemed like the time to bring it up. Neither did our second. Or our third. And then on our fourth Elle announced she'd accepted a job at a law firm in Maine like it was as simple of a decision as ordering the salad she'd just decided on.

I wasn’t surprised she received an offer so quickly. My guess is they don’t have a lot of Harvard Law grads with Elle’s credentials looking to start their legal careers in northern Maine.

I *was* shocked she announced it so nonchalantly. Like the two of us moving there together had been the plan all along. But that’s exactly how she made it sound when I asked her why. “Because you’re moving there,” is what she said.

I braced myself for her to change her mind over the past few weeks. But she hasn’t expressed anything but enthusiasm since that conversation.

When she was sending me listings for remote log cabins awfully different from the opulent brownstone I’m standing in now.

When she was purchasing a new wardrobe of flannel and snow boots and giving away designer heels.

When she told her parents she was swapping a position at one of the top law firms at the world to work at a tiny law practice handling a dispute over the ownership of a grove of saplings. That’s not a joke; it’s their current case.

Standing in the midst of a sea of cardboard, I finally let myself accept the possibility she’s not going to.

“Okay, that’s the last of it.” Elle rounds the corner and stacks yet another box atop the dozens already lining the entryway, swiping away some of the hair that’s fallen out of her ponytail. She eyes the piles of her belongings. “God, who knew I owned all this?”

I snort. I’ve lost count of the number of times I tactfully suggested we sort her belongings *before* hauling them all to Maine. To which she informed me it was a project that would keep her busy there. I couldn’t really argue with that. The town we’re moving to doesn’t even have its own library. Residents have to travel to the next village over to pick up new reading material.

“Yeah, yeah,” Elle rolls her eyes and redoes her ponytail. Then she kisses me, and God, I’ll never get sick of it. The privilege of being the person who gets to touch Eleanor Clarke like this.

She pulls back with a sly grin. “The movers already took all the furniture, but there’s always the kitchen counter…”

I smirk. “Maybe if you hadn’t taken so fucking long to pack. We’re supposed to be meeting Tommy and Eliza in twenty minutes.”

“So?” she grins devilishly.

“It’ll take an hour just to get to Fernwood if we hit any traffic. *And* we’re supposed to stop at your parents’ on the way.” A stop I’m not exactly looking forward to and would love to get over with as soon as possible.

“I bet I could change your mind…” Elle persists teasingly.

Could? Elle Clarke clearly has no inkling of the power she wields over me. “Yeah, you could,” I inform her. “But we’ve got the rest of our lives to have countertop sex.”

Elle bites her bottom lip, and at first, I think it’s another attempt to make me forget about traffic and the movers waiting outside to carry the rest of her belongings—which, let’s face it, would be a successful one. But then I realize it’s in response to my words.

“We do?” she asks, a mixture of vulnerability and veneration in her voice.

I’m trying to come up with a way to respond that won’t entirely give away the real reason I’m in such a rush to depart when there’s a loud knock on the door. I step away from Elle and open it to see it’s one of the movers.

“Hey, you got the rest of the stuff ready yet?” The middle-aged man asks. His tone clearly conveys there was an unspoken *finally* he wanted to add somewhere in that question. I can relate.

“Yes. It’s all good to go,” I reply, pulling the front door of Elle’s home fully open so he can see the stacks of boxes.

The mover grimaces. “We should be there at eight.”

“Perfect,” I reply, grabbing one of the bags Elle set by the door and heading down the steps for the car. She follows me, with the last of the belongings we could possibly stuff in her sedan. Scout’s already in a crate in the backseat, and he barks forlornly as I stuff a duffle bag in beside him. Elle tosses me the car keys, and then climbs into the passenger seat, covered with so many odds and ends I can barely see her.

“I thought you were in some big rush?” She rolls her eyes and shoves a hair dryer into the backseat.

For some reason I expected some sentimentality from her, but she doesn’t even glance at the brownstone she’s spent the past three years living in as I pull away from the curb to start weaving through the Boston traffic. We pull up outside the massive Colonial-style house I’ve only been to once before forty-five minutes later.

“In and out, okay?” Elle tells me as we climb outside the car.

“You don't have to tell me twice,” I reply as we approach the front door of her parents’ house.

We met them in the city for dinner a few weeks ago. Uncomfortable is the first word that comes to mind to describe that evening, and that was before Elle informed them she’s moving to Maine with me. I seriously doubt drawing their only daughter to live in the northern wilderness has done their opinion of me any favors.

The door opens seconds before we reach it. If I had to guess, Elle's mother was tracking our approach.

“Hi, Mom,” Elle says.

“Hi, Mrs. Clarke,” I greet.

“Hello, Eleanor. Ryder,” she replies politely.

She steps aside, and I follow Elle inside the marble foyer, resisting the urge to whistle. The inside of the house is even nicer than the outside, and that’s saying something.

“Where’s Dad?” Elle asks, looking around the fancy furnishings for her father. I’m doing the same, except more in admiration. My uncle used to make a living nicking items from houses far less endowed than this one.

“He had to go into the office,” Mrs. Clarke replies.

“Of course,” Elle replies. The words aren’t sarcastic, more resigned. I’m left battling an annoying mixture of disappointment and relief.

“That’s everything.” Elle’s mother nods to a neat stack of five plastic bins located just below a painting that looks like it belongs in a museum in Rome.

“Do you think it’ll fit?” Elle asks me, dubiously.

No. “Sure,” I reply. “It will just take some… rearranging.”

The rearranging ends up consisting of me emptying the entirety of the car and re-packing it while Elle and her mother watch and talk. The conversation mostly consists of Mrs. Clarke catching Elle up on people I’ve never heard of or met. I get the sense she’s the type of person who likes to focus on the imperfections in other’s lives to avoid looking at her own too closely.

“Okay,” I announce once I’ve wedged the final bin in the footwell behind Elle’s seat. “That's everything.”

Elle gives me a wide smile, but her mother looks a bit lost.

“I’ll text you when we arrive,” Elle tells her mother, giving her a hug.

“All right,” Mrs. Clarke replies. Her tone is cool, but I’m good at reading people. She’s a facade waiting to crack.

I take a hesitant step forward, then two. I’m not sure who’s more surprised when Mrs. Clarke opens her arms to hug me: Elle, or me. “Take care of my little girl,” she whispers to me.

“I will,” I promise.

Elle’s mother drops her arms, and nods. Elle eyes us curiously but doesn’t say anything as she rounds the front of the car and climbs in the passenger side. I’m guessing she’ll save that interrogation for later. It’s delayed by her phone ringing as soon as I climb into the car. I don’t have to ask who it is, because Eliza’s voice blares out of the fancy surround sound speakers. “Where the hell are you guys?”

“Where the hell is the volume?” I ask, studying the panel of switches and dials.

Elle laughs, and then taps on her phone, switching off the Bluetooth connection. She and Eliza chat as I maneuver my way out of Elle’s parents’ driveway and through their cul-de-sac out onto the main road.

When we reach downtown Fernwood, Eliza and Tommy are already waiting, seated on one of the benches that line the street. I take the closest available spot, and we climb out of the car. Two bags fall out of the car in the process of Elle getting Scout out of the backseat, and I grimace. Looks like I’ll be repacking the car. Again.

“Hey, man,” Tommy greets when I approach, with Elle and Scout right behind me. He’s beaming, and I know exactly why. He hasn’t stopped giving me shit ever since Elle and I got together. Mostly about how happy he is for me, but also about how I could have saved a ridiculous amount of drama by figuring things out before his wedding. I suppose that’s fair.

“Hey.” I grin back, and he gives me a hug, clapping me on the back. I ignore the questioning look that follows. I hug Eliza next, but it’s briefer. I know she and Elle go back, to a chapter I wasn’t part of. And I was too distracted by the brunette currently hugging Tommy to really get to know her at any of the events this summer I was supposed to do so at.

Scout pulls Elle over to a nearby tree, and Eliza follows them. Elle and Eliza start chatting about something involving shoes, and I quickly tune it out. Tommy and I trail behind.

“So?” Tommy asks as soon as the girls are out of earshot, just like I knew he would. “What did he say?”

I sigh. “He wasn’t even there.”

Tommy’s face falls with disappointment. “Are you not going to ask her, then?”

“I don’t know.” I kick a pebble on the path. “It shouldn’t matter, right? It’s our decision. And I know things aren’t great between them right now.” Partly because of me, but I don’t say that. Tommy already knows.

“Duke Douche probably asked.”

“York. Yeah, I’m sure he did.” He also knew what the answer was going to be. I don’t. “Isn’t not asking better than getting a no?”

“You don’t know it’s going to be a no,” Tommy replies. “They’re letting her move to Maine with you.”

“I’m not sure if ‘letting’ is the right word,” I inform him. Elle told me very few details about her conversation with her parents regarding our future plans. I’m guessing it was for a reason—one I wouldn’t be very happy about. “And she’s a grown woman. There’s nothing they could do to stop her.”

Tommy shrugs in agreement, which isn’t super helpful. “What have you got to lose, man? She picked you. Take the high road. Make it harder for the old man to hate you.”

“So you’re agreeing he does hate me.” I laugh. “Your pep talks need work.”

“He doesn’t know you, Ryder. Aside from…”

“Right. The prison stint.”

“Yes. But he also knows you care about Elle. Really care about her. I mean, you’ve been obsessed with her since we were fourteen!”

“Not obsessed,” I dispute.

Tommy snorts. “Uh-huh. Keep telling yourself that.”

I spent the first day of high school—and many since—repeating one sentence over and over again in my head. Not *Don’t get in a fight.* Or *ignore the whispers*. Nope. It was *She’ll never be yours*. I’ve spent the past eleven years telling myself this would never happen. That Eleanor Clarke would never choose *me*. The first two months of senior year were the only time I even allowed myself to ponder the possibility. Then life royally fucked us over. Me, more specifically. I spent seven years certain that was that. Did everything I could to push her away. But I also wasn’t going to make the same mistake I know William York is going to regret for the rest of his life.

Eleanor Clarke isn’t someone you just walk away from.

If she was willing to fight for me, I sure as shit wasn't going to give her up.

With that thought in mind, I pull my phone out of my pocket.

Tommy beams. "I'll tell Elle and Eliza you got a call about the new job."

"Thanks, man," I reply, taking a deep breath. Just like with Elle, I have no idea what I did to deserve a best friend like Tommy.

A quick Google search pulls up the name and number of Elle's father's law firm. It only rings once before a pert female voice answers. "Washington and Stevens, how may I direct your call?"

"Hello. I'd like to speak with Michael Clarke, please."

The chipper secretary falters. "Can I take a message? Mr. Clarke doesn't like to be distur—"

"Tell him it's Ryder James calling." Anxiety injects a harsher form of authority in my voice. "He'll want to take this call."

There's a pause. "One moment."

I stand there, looking at Fernwood's small downtown strip. Elle, Tommy, and Eliza are almost a block away, standing in front of the coffee shop that used to be Brewed Awakenings. Elle catches my eye and gives me a questioning look. I reply with what I mean to be a reassuring smile. Hard to say if I succeed, though. My insides twist and dip like the pavement below me has turned into a roiling sea as nothing but silence permeates the phone line.

Elle points at the coffee shop, and I nod my understanding before they disappear inside.

"Is my daughter all right?"

I startle as a brisk bass barks the question out, breaking the silence on the line. "Hi, Mr. Clarke."

"My daughter, Ryder?"

"Yes," I rush to assure him. "Elle is fine." I guess it's hardly a surprise that was his first inclination for why I might be calling him, based on our relationship. Or lack of, rather.

There's a pause. "Why are you calling, then?" Michael Clarke doesn't waste any time. It's a trait I admire, even as I'm currently having a lot of trouble convincing myself this was in fact a good idea. "Ryder?"

"I'm planning to ask Elle to marry me. Tonight." I blurt out.

Silence.

“I know you don’t approve, but I thought I should let you know.” It’s not really a request for a blessing, but it’s more than I thought I’d be able to choke out.

“Eleanor just ended an engagement.”

Something tells me Michael Clarke is not a man who appreciates sarcasm. So I swallow *Really? I had no idea*, and instead say “I’m aware.”

More silence.

“She’s moving all the way to Maine for me. I want to make certain she doesn’t have any doubts about my commitment.”

“I don’t see how she’d have any doubts about that.” A compliment. Maybe? “Any teenage boy who spends three months working on a two-week Physics project can clearly commit.”

I wonder if Elle has any idea her father was aware of our freshman year relationship. Because I sure as hell wasn’t. Tommy’s words about me being obsessed with Elle since we were fourteen come back to me. Does the length of my interest in Elle work in my favor with Michael Clarke? Or is it merely another strike that I was corrupting his daughter for even longer than most think?

Now it’s my turn not to say anything.

“Kristen always hoped for a summer wedding,” Elle’s father finally says. “But we can make other months work. If you two wanted to make it official sooner.”

It’s not a blessing, but it’s close.

It’s an acknowledgement.

It’s also a clear indication he doesn’t think Elle is going to turn me down, which is a reassurance I didn’t realize just how much I was needing.

“I’d leave all those details to Elle,” I reply.

“Probably for the best.”

“Well, I should—” I start. I was half-expecting him to hang up on me. Bringing up wedding details was not anticipated.

“Hathaway lost his bar license last week following an independent investigation. He’s no longer at this firm.” Michael Clarke informs me.

I falter. Having a conversation with Elle’s father includes a lot of decoding, I’m finding. I may be clueless when it comes to a lot of Elle’s world, but I do know her father wields the power at his firm. If Liam’s father was fired because of something involving me—which is what I think

he’s saying—it means Michael Clarke either made it happen or allowed it to happen.

Either option suggests less loyalty to a good friend and more towards—well, me. Elle only told her parents we were moving this past weekend. Which suggests this may not have just been a reaction to whatever ultimatum I’m guessing she gave them.

“Okay,” I say. Something tells me more questions or a thank you is not what he’s looking for.

“Drive safe.” The phone clicks.

I stand there, looking at Fernwood with fresh eyes. I wasn’t lying when I told Elle I was looking for a new start. But a part of me was also certain I’d never find any modicum of acceptance in this town, at least not outside the trailer park relegated to its outskirts. But my conversation with Elle’s father has me reconsidering. Maybe this isn’t a place I need to dread returning to. Not even the couple side glances I receive as I walk down the street have me reconsidering.

I push open the door of the coffee shop to find Elle, Eliza, and Tommy are all standing at the end of the counter, waiting.

“Everything okay?” Elle asks me as soon as I approach, a small wrinkle appearing between her eyes as she studies me. Tommy is looking at me as well, obviously burning to ask me the same thing. Eliza’s the only one not analyzing me.

“Great,” I reply, flashing her the grin that usually makes her blush. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Tommy smile as well.

“Your new boss?” Elle pushes, her cheeks pink.

“Yup,” I lie. “Just wanted to make sure I’d gotten some paperwork.”

She nods, relaxing. Is she as concerned things might tumble around us as I’ve spent the past few weeks worrying about? That I might hate my new job? That she might hate hers? That one of us might get cold feet?

My resolution about proposing hardens. I was worried it was too soon, but I think it’s reassurance we could both use.

A chance to start this new chapter with a new significance.

“I ordered you a coffee,” Elle tells me.

“Thank you,” I reply, smiling at her. She doesn’t break eye contact the way I expect her to, and we just stare at each other. Is she remembering the last time we were in this coffee shop together, the same way I am?

All my most recent memories in Fernwood include her.

She’s spent the last seven years here for summers and holidays.

Did memories of us haunt her?

“Were they this bad in high school?” Eliza asks Tommy. I jerk my gaze away from Elle, who’s blushing again.

“Worse,” Tommy replies, but he’s smiling as he says it.

I guess this turn of events might be a bit jarring for Eliza. Elle and I have spent the last couple months having an array of painful, public arguments. Especially since she was friends with Elle for the entirety of her relationship with William and seemed oblivious to my existence being anything more than Tommy’s best friend.

“We were not,” I argue.

“Right. The incessant making out wasn’t the least bit obnoxious,” Tommy replies.

“Yeah, I recall you *hating* hanging out with the cheer squad while we were busy,” Elle retorts.

Tommy grins. “Yeah, okay, there were perks you were the one who fell for James’ charm.”

“What charm?” Elle replies, smirking.

“I’ve been saving it for a special occasion,” I inform her, smirking back. “Maybe I’ll break it out later.”

“You promise?” she asks.

“Doesn’t our new place have a counter?”

Elle laughs, loud and genuine. “Touché, James.”

“Get a room,” Tommy tells us. He’s clearly under no illusions we’re talking about cooking. But he’s also studying the two of us like a proud parent, so I don’t flip him off like I was originally planning to.

The barista serves up our drinks, and we head back outside to retrieve Scout.

“We should get going, guys,” Elle says. “*Someone* is obsessed with our travel itinerary and how far behind we are on it.”

Tommy smirks at me. He knows exactly why I’m obsessed with leaving on time. “If you want to unload the hundreds of boxes you packed in the middle of the night, we can leave whenever you want,” I tell Elle.

She smirks at me before hugging Tommy and Eliza goodbye. Yeah, that’s what I thought. We finish saying our goodbyes and then head back toward the car. It takes ten minutes to get Scout in and repack the backseat.

Finally, we're back in the car with all our belongings. Minus the moving truck's worth of Elle's.

"You ready?" I ask her, turning on the car.

Elle turns, her smile brighter than the September sun. It filters through the glass window, turning some of her chestnut hair into shades of auburn. "Yeah, I'm ready."

"You sure? Four hours is a long time to spend in a car," I warn.

"Four hours doesn't sound long to me at all," Elle replies. There's no trace of hesitancy in her face as she smirks at my thinly veiled reference to the rest of our lives.

I shift into drive and pull away from the curb. The coffee shop we just left flashes by on the right, followed by the bookstore next door to it. A couple of restaurants, the general store, and the post office follow. Then, there's the field, with only a few wildflowers still standing. Next, Fernwood High School, with a parking lot full of expensive cars. A couple houses, and then I press down on the accelerator. This road transitions right into the highway that will take us north.

I don't look in the rearview mirror as the car picks up speed. Elle doesn't glance back at Fernwood, either.

I know we'll be back.

I know this is a beginning, not an ending.

And I'm more excited about what lies ahead.

OceanofPDF.com

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for taking the time to read *Come Break My Heart Again*. I hope you enjoyed Ryder and Elle's story!

Please take a moment to rate or review this book. It's an irreplaceable way to help me reach new readers, but more importantly, I'd love to hear your thoughts!

All the best,
C.W. Farnsworth

OceanofPDF.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First off, I'd like to say a massive thanks to my early readers, as well as the incredible members of bloggers and bookstagrammers community. Your willingness to share and support my writing means more than I could ever convey.

Erica, you're a true gem. Thank you for your loyalty, support, and honesty! It's improved all of my books.

Kim, it was an absolute pleasure to work with you on the cover design for this book. I could not be happier with how it turned out.

Alison, thank you for all of your thoughtful comments and for scouring this manuscript with such detail. Your notes have made me a better writer.

Finally, thank you to EJE and MWT for your endless support. Without it, I would never have written this book, or any of my others.

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C.W. Farnsworth is the author of six novels. She has always been a voracious reader, and grew up devouring books by flashlight under the covers long after she was supposed to be asleep. She primarily writes young adult and new adult romance, her favorite genres to read, often involving sports.

Charlotte is a native New Englander, but attended college in New York, and now resides in Washington, D.C. Find her on Facebook, Instagram @authorcwfarnsworth, Twitter @cw_farnsworth, and check out her website www.authorcwfarnsworth.com for upcoming book news!

OceanofPDF.com

ALSO BY C.W. FARNSWORTH

Four Months, Three Words

Kiss Now, Lie Later

First Flight, Final Fall

The Hard Way Home

The Easy Way Out

OceanofPDF.com